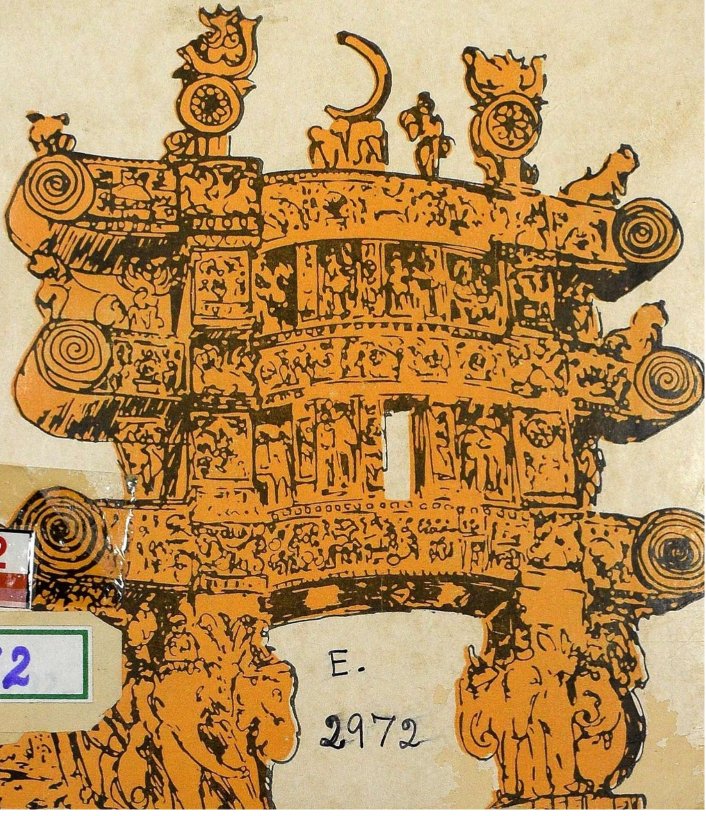
# BUDDHIST SHRINES IN INDIA



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Bodhisattva Padmapani, Ajanta

# BUDDHIST SHRINES IN INDIA

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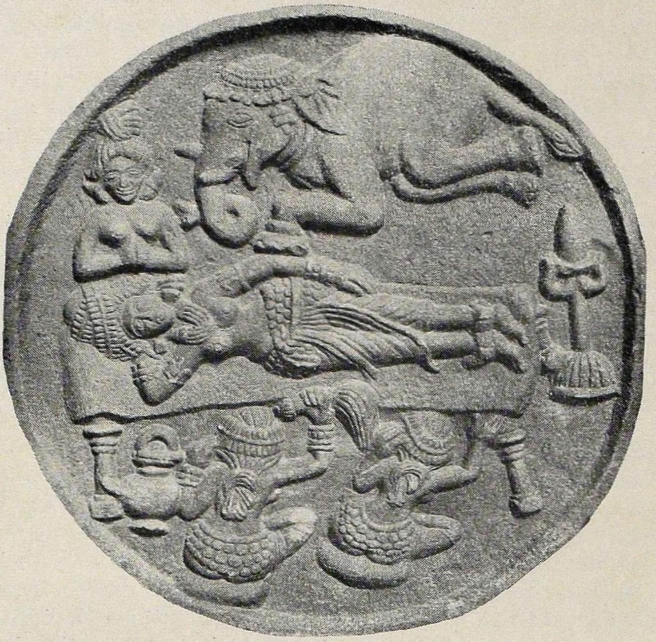
# INTRODUCTION

The sixth century B.C. saw a great ferment in the intellectual life of Asia. A vast movement appears to have stirred men's minds in widely separated parts—Confucius and Lao-tse in China, Zoroaster in Iran and Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India. The Indian movement was the most fruitful as it culminated in the foundation of two distinct religious systems, both based on the conception of the absolute sanctity of life—ahimsa (non-violence)—and both preaching the doctrine of Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Action. Both the creeds took deep root in India and one of them, the religion of Gautama Buddha, extended far beyond her limits in every direction. Though now almost extinct in the land of its birth, it is still professed by one-third of the world's population. The rise of Buddhism was thus a signal landmark in the history of India and also that of Asia.

As is usual with every religious teacher, legends have grown round the life of the founder of Buddhism. By stripping the traditional accounts of the miraculous and mythical embellishments, it is possible, however, to discover the historical nucleus. About the sixth century B.C. there was a little state at Kapilavastu at the foot of the Himalayas. It was ruled by a princely family of the Sakya clan. To Suddhodana of this family and his queen, Mayadevi, was born a son, Siddhartha, in the year 566 B.C. The birth took place at Lumbinigrama, a village near Kapilavastu, on the Indo-Nepal border, the mother dying shortly after. The sages and seers proclaimed that the new-born babe would become either a world conqueror or a Buddha. The father was warned and he brought up

the boy in luxurious surroundings, away from all cares and afflictions of this world. But all attempts proved futile and three ominous sights, one after another—old age, disease and death—made Siddhartha realise the sufferings of all created beings and the hollowness of worldly pleasures. "Never before had a human soul contemplated this suffering with such pitiful, yet unruffled, sympathy." He was meditating on the ways of deliverance when the calm serenity of a passionless recluse powerfully attracted him. At that time, then in his twenty-ninth year, a son was born to him, and thinking this to be an additional tie, he resolved to leave his home and family at once to seek salvation, not only for himself but also for the whole of mankind. In the stillness of the night he left his palace and the city and for long wandered about as a homeless ascetic seeking instruction from religious teachers. At Uruvilva, near Gaya, he practised the most rigid austerities only to discover that they were of no help to reach his goal. Next, taking his bath in the river Nairanjana (modern Lilajan), he took his seat under a pipal tree with the grim resolve not to leave that seat until he became possessed of the supreme knowledge (*bodhi*), i.e., enlightenment. Miracle followed miracle and he gained victory over the wicked Mara; and at last he attained enlightenment under that tree which came to be known as the Bodhi tree. Thereafter, he came to be known as Buddha, or the awakened one, Tathagata (he who has attained the Truth) and Sakyamuni or the sage of the Sakya clan. As he belonged to the Gautama *gotra,* he was also known as Gautama Buddha, as distinct from six other Buddhas who are said to have preceded him.

His next move was to preach the Truth that he had gained and he proceeded to the Deer Park at Isipatana (Sarnath), near Varanasi. There before the five monks, his one-time associates during the early period of his quest after Truth, he preached his First Sermon exhorting the middle course that leads to Nirvana. The middle course consists of the noble eight-fold path (*ashtangika marga*)—(1) Right Views; (2) Right Aspirations; (3) Right Speech; (4) Right Conduct; (5) Right Livelihood; (6) Right Exertions; (7) Right Mindedness; and (8) Right Contemplation.



**Mayadevi's dream—a medallion on the railing of a stupa (Bharhut)**

He also gave an exposition of the Supreme Knowledge, the knowledge of the series of causes and effects, the four Noble Truths (*arya satyani*), namely, suffering, the causes of suffering, the suppression of suffering, and the path that leads to this suppression. By this preaching he inaugurated the Rule of Law and set the Wheel of Law in motion (*dharmachakrapravartana*).

For forty-five years, the Buddha wandered about preaching his gospel to princes and commoners alike. All ranks swelled the number of converts to the new faith. At last, in his eightieth year, he died, *i.e.*, attained his Nirvana, at Kusinagara (Kusinara), modern Kasia in the Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh, in 486 B.C.

During his lifetime the religion of Gautama Buddha (or Saddharma, as it was known to the followers of the faith) was confined within the limits of Kosala and Magadha, which had been the centre of his own activities. For a little over two centuries after his death the new faith remained more or less dormant. The conquest of Kalinga by Asoka proved to be a turning point in the history of the new religion. The grim realities of war made a deep impression on the mind of Asoka and he forsook conquest by the force of arms, which had been the traditional policy of Magadha from the time of Bimbisara, a contemporary of Gautama Buddha. He instituted in its place a new policy, that of *Dhammavijaya,* i.e., the conquest of men's hearts by the law of piety. The intense remorse which he felt at the sufferings caused by war gradually made him a convert to the religion of non-violence preached by the all-compassionate one, and as a result of his exertions the teachings of Gautama Buddha rapidly became known, not only throughout India but also outside. Ceylon received Buddhism from the emissaries (his own son and daughter) sent by Asoka, and if tradition is to be believed, it was Asoka's missionary zeal which was responsible for the conversion of Burma to the new faith. In his inscriptions Asoka says that the Dhamma had spread far to the west in the dominions of his contemporaries. The missionary activity of Asoka endowed the followers of the faith with a proselytising zeal and the religion of the sage of the Sakya clan spread far and wide in every direction with the result that it still survives over great areas of the present-day world.

# SACRED PLACES

Gautama Buddha has left his footprints on the soil of India and his mark on the soul of mankind. In the course of the growth of his religion, this human teacher eclipsed even the heavenly gods and the places consecrated by his presence were held in great veneration. Before he entered Nirvana the Buddha himself spoke of the four places which a pious believer ought to visit with feelings of faith and reverence: the Lumbinivana where the Tathagata was born, Gaya (Bodh-Gaya) where he reached perfect Enlightenment, the Deer Park at Isipatana (Sarnath) where for the first time he proclaimed the Law, and Kusinagara where he reached the unconditional state of Mahaparinirvana. He dilated on the merits of pilgrimage to these places and declared that "they who shall die on such pilgrimages shall be reborn, after death, in the happy realm of heaven".

The other four places of pilgrimage which, with the above four, make up the atthamahathanani (ashtamahasthanani), or eight sacred places, were the scenes of four of the principal miracles that the Blessed One was said to have performed. Though not particularly cited in the early Buddhist texts as places of special veneration, these sites also grew in sanctity on account of the Master's connection with them and the legends that have grown around them. One of these places is Sravasti, the capital of Kosala, where the Buddha, according to legend, gave a display of miraculous powers to confound Purana Kasyapa, the leader of the Tirthika sect. After this miracle the Buddha, in accordance with the custom of the previous Buddhas, ascended to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods; preached the Abhidham-

ma to his deceased mother and descended to the earth at Sankasya, by a triple ladder constructed by Indra's architect. Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha, was the scene of the third miracle in which the Buddha tamed the infuriated elephant, Nalagiri, let loose by his jealous cousin, Devadatta, to encompass his death. The fourth miracle happened at Vaisali, where in a mango-grove a number of monkeys offered the Buddha a bowl of honey. These and other events in his life were favourite subjects of representation in early Buddhist art and the eight conventional events, as enumerated above, formed stereotyped stelae compositions in sculptures beginning with the Gupta period. In early mediaeval manuscript paintings of eastern India and Nepal such scenes have been very frequently represented and some of these illustrate the finest tradition of painting of those days.

These holy places, because of their association with the history of the venerable religion, were great centres of attraction for the pious believers and pilgrimage to them was religiously performed. Asoka calls such a pilgrimage *dhammayata* (*dharmayatra*), or tours of piety. Besides the above, many other places rose into prominence in the course of the development of Buddhism—the sites of important stupas, monasteries, etc.,—and they also claimed the devotion of the followers of the faith. All such places were held sacred with great veneration, maintained with care and adorned with religious establishments of various kinds. In their flourishing days, their splendour and magnificence, no less than their sanctity, attracted visitors from everywhere. With the disappearance of Buddhism from India, such places, however, were gradually neglected and ultimately fell into disrepair and ruins; many were completely forgotten. With the recent advance in Indian archaeology it has been possible to resuscitate them from their long oblivion.

**Buddha in Abhayamudra (Nalanda)**

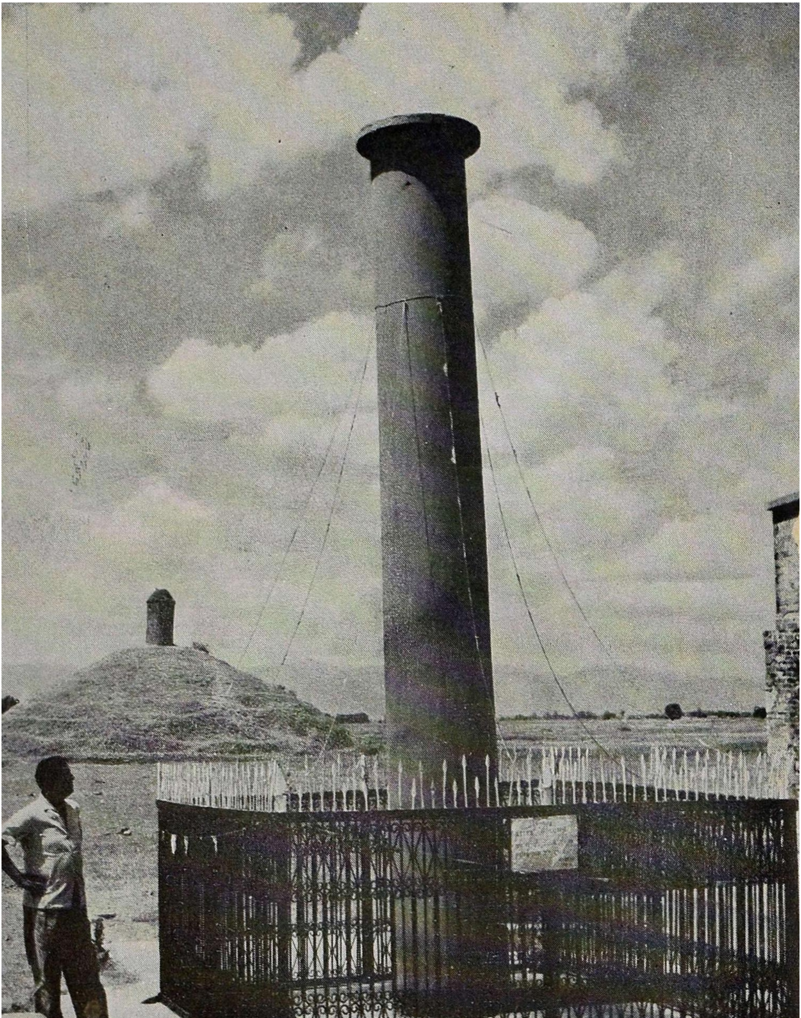
Temptation of Buddha by Mara and Buddha's Enlightenment (Nagarjunakonda)

# LUMBINI

In the recapitulation of the sacred places of Buddhism, Lumbini, where the Blessed One was born, should come first. According to Buddhist texts, it was situated at a distance of twelve miles from Kapilavastu. It is said that when the time of confinement drew near, Mayadevi felt a desire to visit her parents at Devadaha. On arriving at the Lumbini grove she stretched out her arm to take hold of the branch of a *sala* tree which bent down and while she held it she was delivered in a standing position. The child was received by the gods, including the guardians of the quarters, and from their hands by men. Descending to the ground he stood erect, took seven steps and triumphantly declared : "I am the foremost of the world." From Lumbini the boy was brought to Kapilavastu. The scene of the Nativity of the Buddha has been a favourite theme in Indian art in all its phases and frequent representations of this scene are found in sculpture as well as in painting.

Lumbini has been identified with the site of Rummindei, about one mile north of Paderia and two miles north of Bhagwanpur in the Nepalese tehsil of that name, which is situated to the north of the Basti district of Uttar Pradesh.

Rummindei is a picturesque spot and there still stands at the site a pillar engraved with an inscription commemorating Asoka's pilgrimage to this place in the twentieth year after his anointment. "Here the Buddha was born," says Asoka, and this statement puts the identity of the spot beyond doubt. Besides the pillar, there is an ancient shrine with an image depicting the Nativity of the Lord as described in the sacred texts. There is no doubt that because of its imperishable sanctity the place grew in importance and the Chinese pilgrims have left an account of the many establishments that flourished there. It is likely that systematic excavations at the place may reveal many such monuments as the Chinese pilgrims have described. There have been some excavations at the site by the Nepal Government.



Asoka pillar at Lumbini which proclaims : "Here the Buddha was born."

# BODH-GAYA

The next great landmark in the history of Buddhism is the site where the prince of the Sakya clan attained Supreme Wisdom (*bodhi* or *sambodhi*). This memorable event happened at Uruvilva (Uruvela), near Gaya, where he sat in meditation under a pipal tree. Because of its sacred associations the place came to be known as Buddha Gaya (Bodh-Gaya) and the tree as the Bodhi tree. In ancient days the place was known as Sambodhi, as stated in an inscription of Asoka who visited this sacred site when he had been anointed for ten years. To the Buddhists the place was also known as Mahabodhi.

On account of its connection with this signal event, Bodh-Gaya may be said to be the cradle of Buddhism and to the devout Buddhist there is no place of greater interest or sanctity. The holy spot of Enlightenment attracted pious pilgrims from far and near and the sacred tree and the Vajrasana, the diamond seat on which Gautama reached his final victory over worldly desires and realised the bliss of Supreme Knowledge, were maintained with great devotion and care. Holy shrines and stately monuments were raised all around and the account of the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, gives us a glimpse of the past splendour of the place. The sacred tree has passed through many vicissitudes and the present tree is one of the many successors of the original Bodhi tree.

The monuments that were raised in course of centuries were brought to light by Sir Alexander Cunningham and a number of other scholars. The present shrine, the stately Mahabodhi temple, was also renovated at a great expense. Asoka is said to have erected a shrine on the holy spot of

The Mahabodhi Temple (Bodh-Gaya

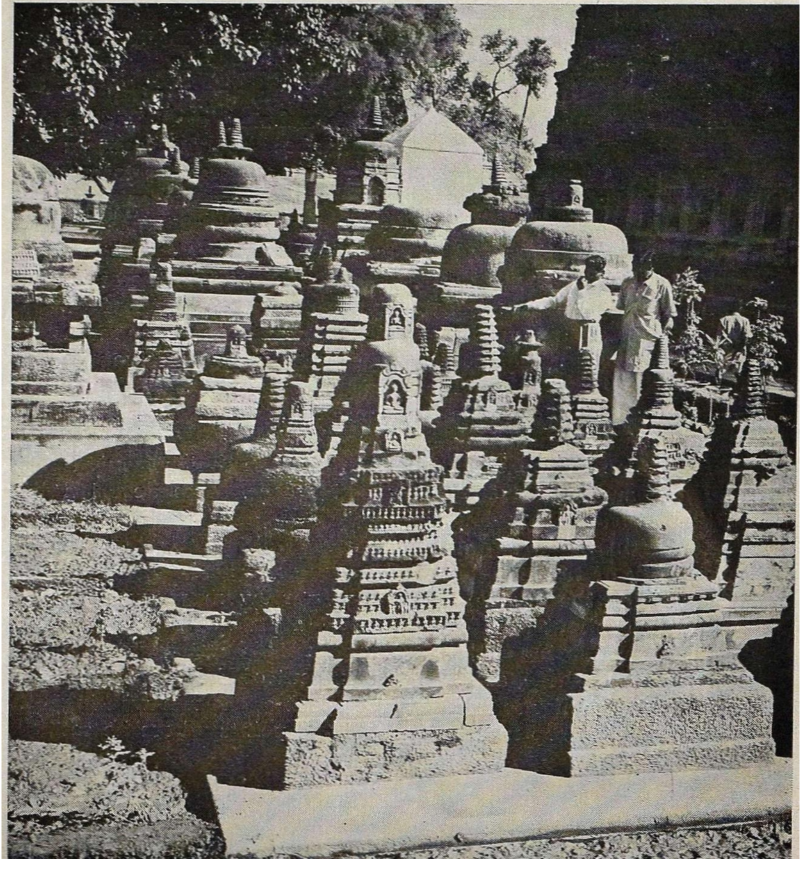
Enlightenment and it is perhaps this shrine which is frequently represented in early Buddhist art. No remains of Asoka's shrine have survived. The stately structure we see now is a later erection. This temple has a balustraded gallery, surrounding the sacred Bodhi tree, which was perhaps made of wood at one time and later translated into stone. The temple has been restored and renovated so many times that it is difficult to determine its date and its original architectural form. From the description of Hiuen Tsang it appears, however, that the temple largely in its present shape and appearance, existed already in the seventh century A.D. This grand temple supplies the prototype of the Mahabodhi temple in Burma.

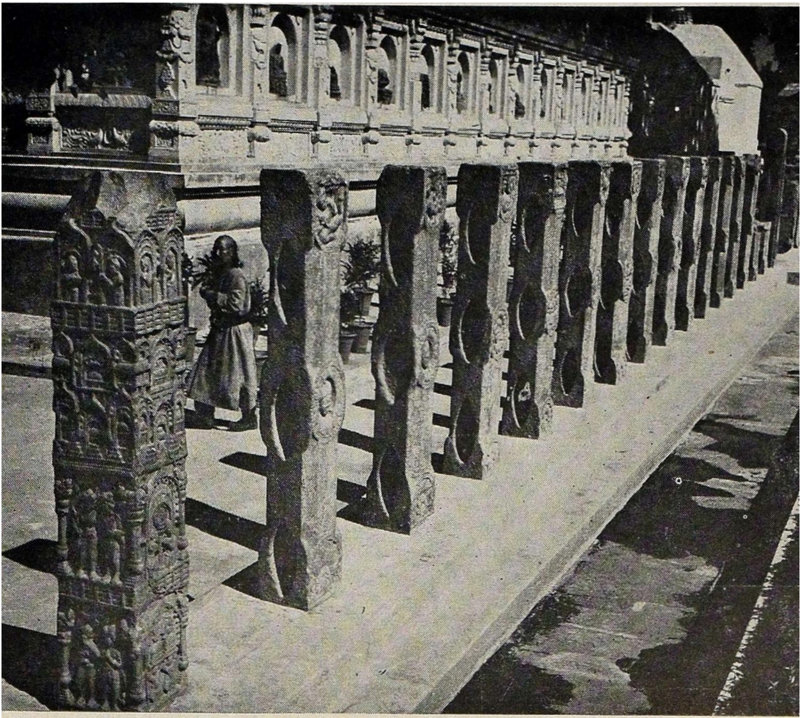
As it now stands, the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh-Gaya is approximately 160 feet high and consists of a straight-edged pyramidal tower surmounted by a stupa, complete with the *harmika* and the *hti*, with a fluted *amalaka*-like lower member and with angle-*amalakas* at the corners demarcating the different stages in the ascent of the tower. The entrance porch, evidently built later than the original temple, is on the east. Each of the four sides of the tower presents several tiers and niches, while the front face has a tall lancet opening for the admission of light into the sanctum. At the base of the tower rises a turret, at the four corners of which there is a replica in miniature of the main spire. Towering against the sky, this lofty and massive pile dominates the entire landscape all around and draws visitors and pilgrims from all parts of the globe.

The temple enshrines the great gilded figure of the Blessed One in the earth-touching attitude which symbolises the supreme event of Enlightenment. The devotion of the votaries has endowed the Master with a robe of state and over his head is a sumptuous umbrella signifying the suzerainty of the Religion of the Master. Along the northern side of the temple there is a narrow masonry platform raised about four feet above the ground. This is known as the "jewel shrine of the walk" or the Buddha's Promenade (*chankama*) where, after the attainment of Enlightenment, the Great Teacher is said to have spent a week in walking to and fro in deep meditation. At the points where he set

his feet there are sculptured ornaments representing the miraculous blossoms which are said to have sprung up under his footsteps. Passing along this promenade and to the west of the temple stands the Bodhi tree and the holy spot of Enlightenment, now marked by a red sandstone slab, representing the Vajrasana on which the Master is said to have reached Perfect Wisdom. The original Mahabodhi shrine, as sketched in the early reliefs, is represented as

Votive stupas in the courtyard of the Tempie (Bodh-Gaya)

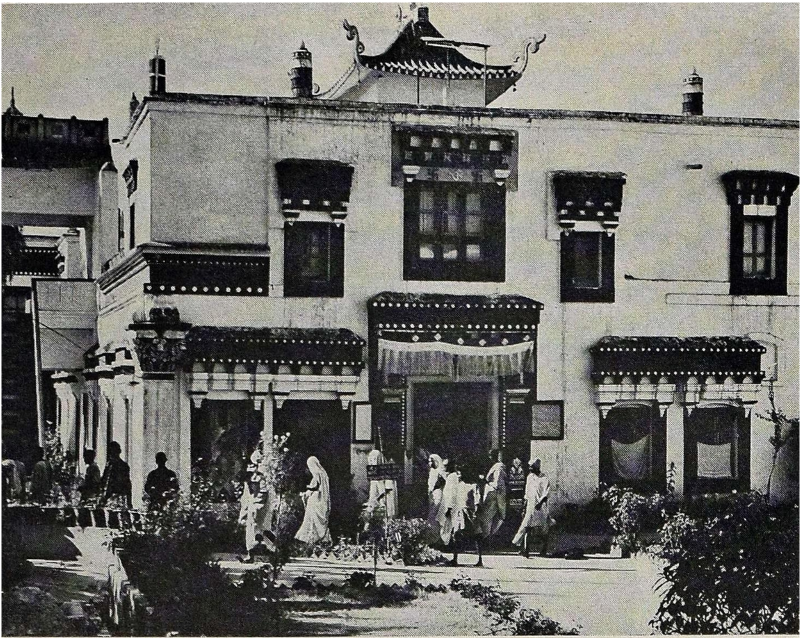




Railing of the Temple (Bodh-Gaya)

enclosing this holy spot including the Bodhi tree. The idea of erecting a temple with a lofty conical tower necessitated its situation being a little to the east of this holy spot so that they are now placed at the back of the temple.

Around the temple lie innumerable remains, of which the most important are the portions of the stone railing which probably surrounded the original shrine. These stone railings represent two different periods of construction, the earlier going back to about the 2nd century B.C. and the



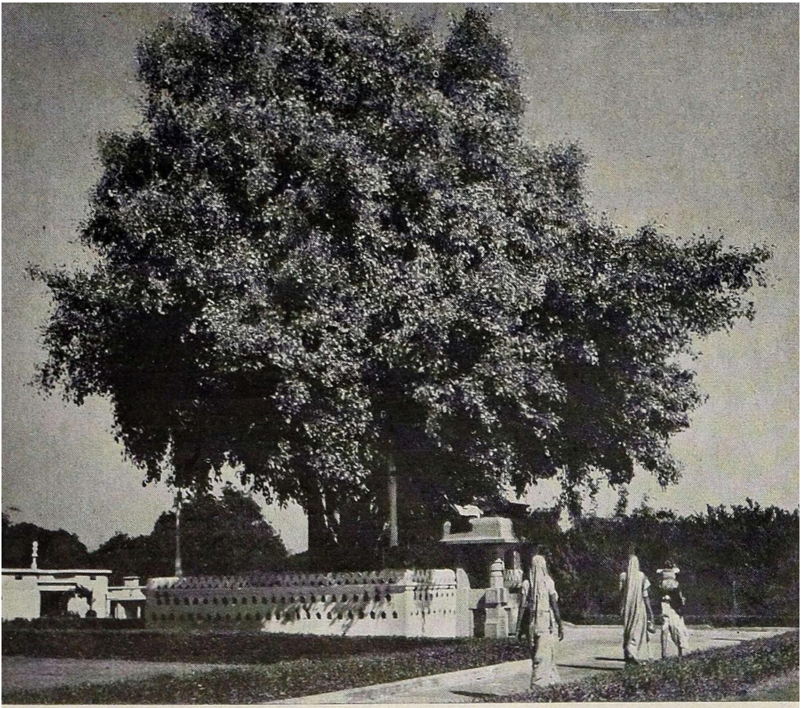
The Tibetan Monastery at Bodh-Gaya

later to the early Gupta period. Interesting carvings still adorn these rail posts, and of these the figures of Indra as Shanti and that of the Sun-god Surya drawn by a four-horsed chariot are noteworthy. Beautiful sculptures and richly decorated votive stupas, scattered all around, still continue to attract the admiring gaze of the pilgrims and visitors who flock to this venerable shrine. The *Mohanta*'s residence lying close to the great temple and the sculpture shed nearby are storehouses of fine sculptures and other relics which once adorned this holy spot. In the immediate vicinity are situated seven sacred sites, still remembered by tradition as being identical with those where the Lord is said to have passed seven tranquil weeks in the enjoyment of his Buddhahood. A visit to these places will well repay the devotion of pious pilgrims as well as the curiosity of inquisitive visitors.

# SARNATH

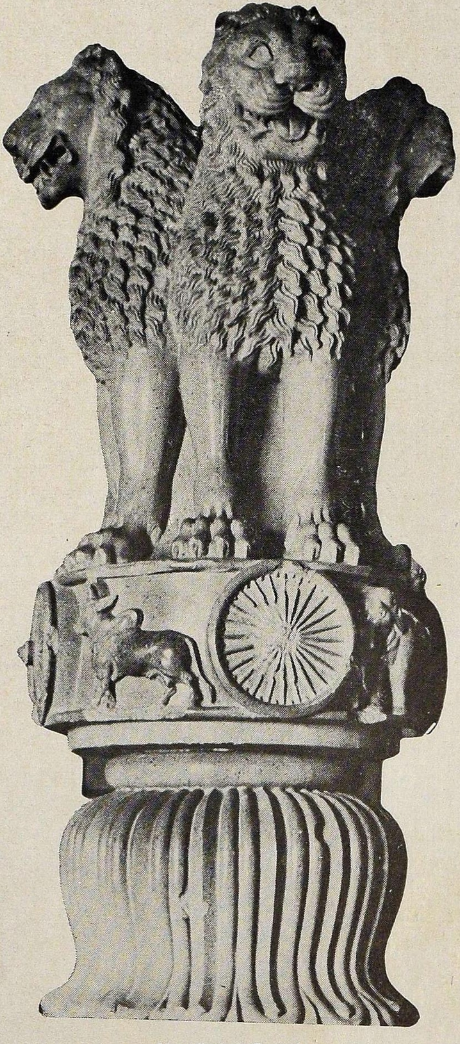
A memorable landmark in the life of the Great Teacher is represented by the holy Isipatana or Sarnath where in the quietness of the Deer Park the Master preached his First Sermon to his five former comrades, revealing for the first time the mystery of suffering and the means of overcoming it. This event is described metaphorically as setting the Wheel of Law in motion (*Dharmachakra-pravartana*) and with this epoch-making incident began the ministry of a religion which was to last for many centuries with far-reaching results.

Sarnath marks the birth of the religion of Gautama Buddha. Hence it became a great centre of Buddhist activities and remained so for more than a millennium and a half. The inscriptions refer to the site as the "Monastery of the Turning of the Wheel of Righteousness" (Saddharmachakrapravartana vihara) by which name this sacred place was known to the ancient Buddhist writers. Though very little is known of the history of the Deer Park during the early centuries of the rise of Buddhism, the place acquired celebrity, like the other holy centres of Buddhism, from the time of Asoka, the imperial patron of the Good Faith. This saintly monarch erected a series of monuments, including a pillar inscribed with an edict of warning to the resident monks and nuns against creating schisms in the Church. Various sects—the Sarvastivadins, the Sammitiyas, etc.—successively gained dominance over the establishment and it is probably the controversies and conflicts among these that necessitated this stern warning from the saintly patron. The Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang, visited the place in the 5th and 7th centuries A.D. respectively, and



Bodhi Tree at Sarnath

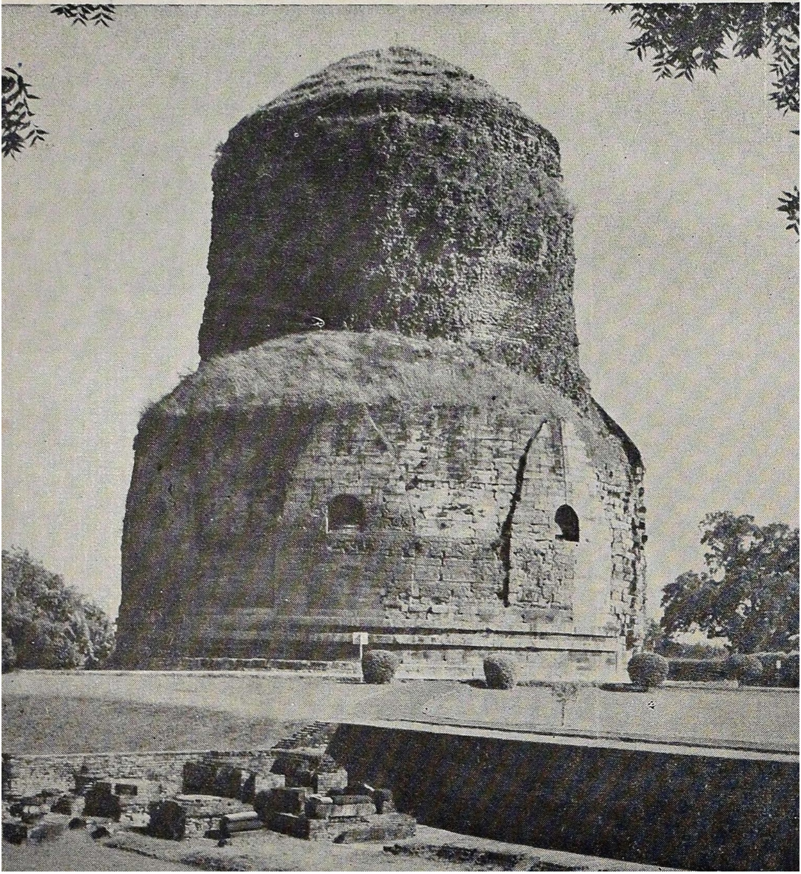
have left us valuable information regarding this important site. The latter is more graphic in his accounts and gives us a picture of the prosperous conditions of the Deer Park with no less than 1,500 monks and nuns residing in the various establishments. Of the numerous edifices described by him the principal ones consisted of a magnificent temple with a life-size brass image of the Buddha represented in the act of turning the Wheel of the Law, a stupa built by Asoka and a stone pillar erected by the same monarch. In later periods also, the site grew in size and prosperity and inscriptions and other evidences relate to the building of new shrines and edifices, as well as to the renovation of old ones, one of the latest being the Temple of the Wheel of



Lion Capital, Sarnath

the Law founded by Kumaradevi, one of the queens of king Govindachandra of Kanauj, in the first half of the 12th century A.D. Soon after, the place was finally destroyed, presumably by the armies of Muhammad Ghori. There are evidences of earlier vandalism too, once probably by the Huns and later in the train of the sack of Varanasi by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. But such damages as were perpetrated were immediately repaired by pious devotees. This final catastrophe, however, accompanied as it was by

Dhamekh Stupa (Sarnath)



huge pillage and destruction led to the waste and desolation of the prosperous establishments. Buddhism had already lost its force and, with the decay and disappearance of the religion from India, the magnificent monuments that had grown up at the site during centuries of prosperous history were buried under the dust and debris of the crumbling ruins.

The ruins of Sarnath cover an extensive area. The Archaeological Department has done a good deal of excavating at the site and a number of interesting monuments and sculptures of exquisite beauty and workmanship have come to light. As one approaches the site from Varanasi the first landmark that attracts the eye is a lofty mound of brick-work, locally known as the Chaukhandi, surmounted by an octagonal tower at the top. The mound represents the ruins of a stupa on a terraced basement erected to mark the spot where the Buddha, on his way from Gaya to Isipatana, first met his five former comrades who were soon to become converts to his faith. From the antiquities and associated objects found during excavations the stupa appears to have belonged to the Gupta period. The octagonal tower at the top is a much later structure having been erected by Akbar in A.H. 998 (1588) to commemorate the visit of his father, Humayun to this holy spot.

Half a mile to the north is the site of the Deer Park adorned with imposing buildings in the days of its pristine greatness. All is now in ruins, save and except a battered structure, the Dhamekh stupa, which rears its head up to a height of nearly 150 feet above the surrounding level. The ruins have been laid bare by the spade of the archaeologists and the site, as exposed, shows that the temples and stupas occupied the central position with the monasteries in the area around. They belong to different periods of construction, the earliest going back to the days of Asoka. Traces of successive restorations and renovations are also evident in some of the important buildings.

The Asoka stupa, seen by Hiuen Tsang, has been identified with the ruins of a large brick stupa, commonly known as Jagat Singh's stupa after Jagat Singh, the Diwan of

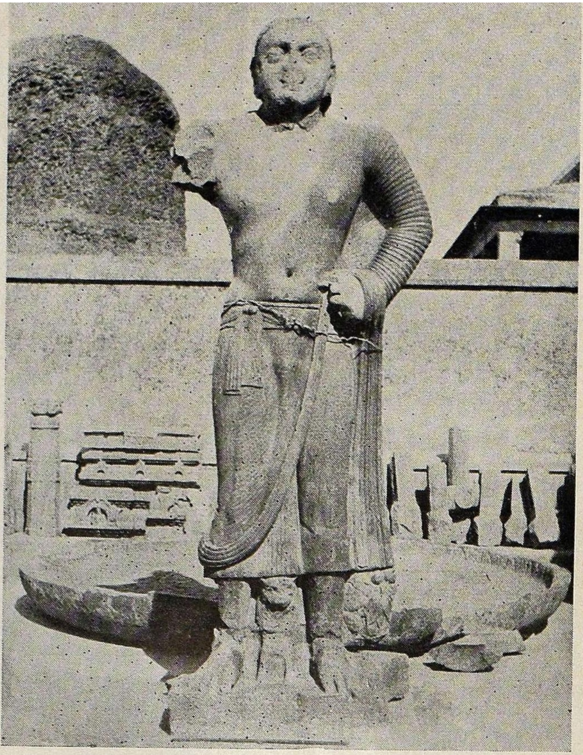
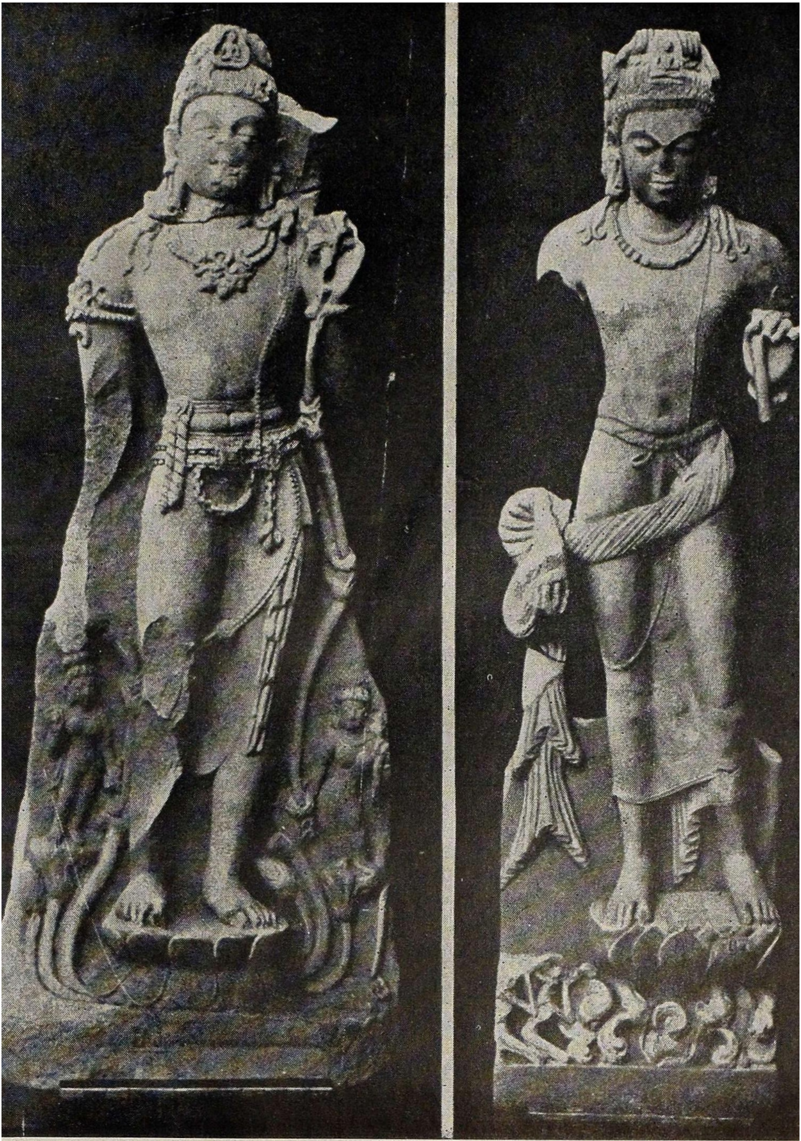


Image of the Bodhisattva (Sarnath)

Raja Chait Singh of Varanasi, who dismantled it in 1794 for bricks for the construction of a market in Varanasi. The relics exhumed on this occasion were responsible for resuscitating this holy place from centuries of oblivion. The structure, as it is now seen, is the result of successive additions, the innermost core being probably coeval with the period of Asoka. The site of this stupa probably marks the spot where the Buddha delivered his first discourse and turned the Wheel of the Law. A little farther to the north stands the broken stump of the Asoka pillar, already referred to, the magnificent Lion Capital of which may now



Lokanatha and Siddhaikavira (Sarnath)

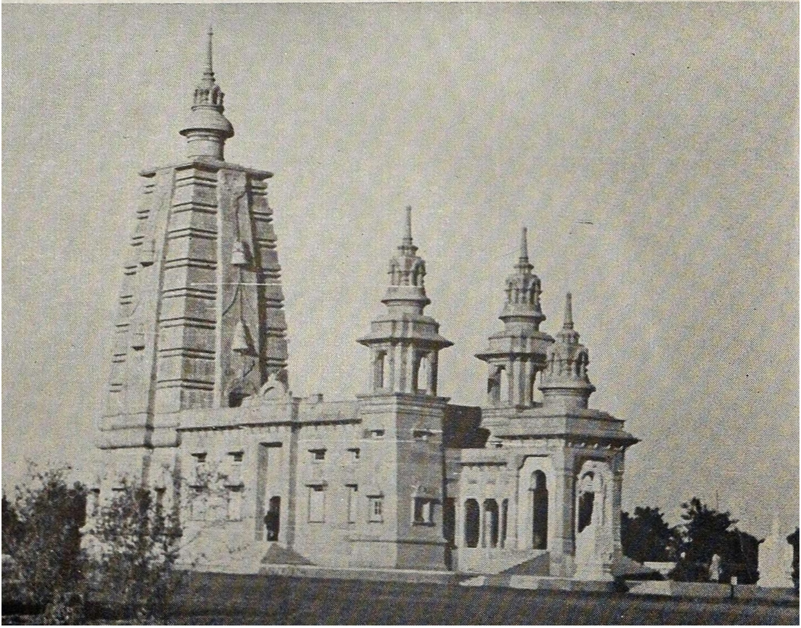
be seen in the Archaeological Museum nearby. To the east may be seen the ruins of a temple, designated as the Main Shrine, which must have dated from the Gupta period, if not earlier. The temple was of the usual square plan with subsidiary chapels on the north, south and west, the east being occupied by a portico forming the entrance to the shrine. It is not impossible that this monument occupying a central position represents the remains of the lofty temple noticed by Hiuen Tsang. The southern chapel, when dug through, disclosed an important relic of the Asoka period, namely, a monolithic square rail chiselled and polished with consummate skill as we see in the Asoka pillars and capitals. This rail was originally placed probably over the top of the Asoka stupa around the parasol (*Chhatravali*) and was later transferred to its present position as an important relic of the past.

Around the main shrine there is a paved court with a paved approach from the east. On this court are found innumerable remains of stupas of various shapes and also sometimes of shrines, the remnants of pious benefactions by votaries and pilgrims who flocked to this holy spot. On the north and south were ranged monastic establishments. The monasteries, whether large or small, were all of the same plan, the residential cells being arranged on the four sides of an open quadrangle. Some of them had been re-built again and again, and many earlier establishments were found buried under later constructions. The Saddharmachakra Jina Vihara, established by Kumaradevi, the queen of Govindachandra, in the first half of the 12th century A.D. envelops several such early monasteries, situated to the north of the main shrine, which go back to the Kushana days, if not earlier. An expansive composition, this latest monument at Sarnath was elaborately planned with a number of open courts and lofty gateways and perhaps connected with an underground shrine in the extreme west which is approached by a long subterranean passage. Unfortunately even this latest monument has suffered heavily at the hands of the despoilers and a complete and systematic plan of this establishment cannot be reconstructed at present.

Buddha (Mathura)

Among the ruins of Sarnath the most imposing is no doubt the Dhamekh stupa situated at the south-east corner of the site. Although battered, it is still 143 feet high from its original foundations and consists of a solid structure, built of massive blocks of stone at the lower stage and of brick, probably faced with stone, at the upper. It is of a cylindrical shape and is relieved in the lower section by eight projecting bays, each with a large niche originally containing an image. This lower section is adorned with a broad belt of carved ornament of an intricate geometric pattern with floral arabesques above and below it. The whole body of carving is singularly vigorous and exquisitely beautiful and on the evidence of style the monument, as it now is, may be ascribed to the Gupta age; at any rate not later than the 6th century A.D. The modern name, Dhamekh, is probably derived from the Sanskrit Dharmeksha, meaning "the pondering of the law", and from its position—in a line with the Dharmarajika stupa of Asoka which stands

Mulagandhakuti Vihara (Sarnath)



due west of this—it appears to be an important monument, the original structure on this spot going back possibly to the days of Asoka.

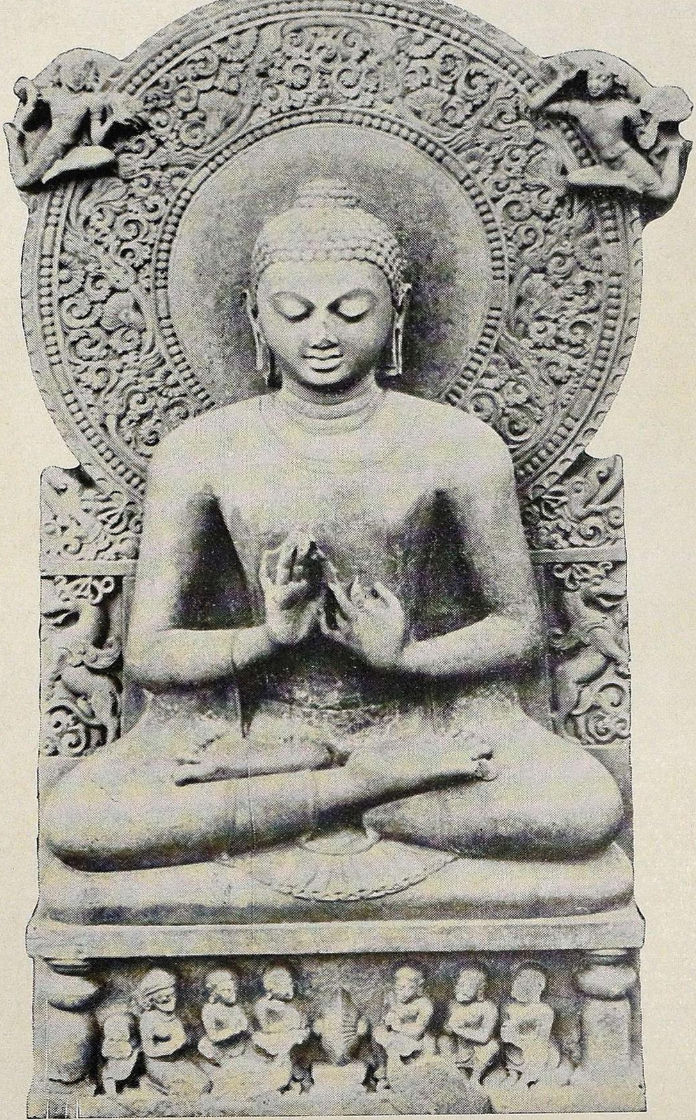
Apart from the ruins and relics of the past a modern place of interest is furnished by the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, erected by the Mahabodhi Society to enshrine certain Buddhist relics discovered at Taxila. It is an elegant structure with marble floors, much of its elevation and decorative arrangements being inspired by old forms hallowed through centuries. On the inside walls are magnificent paintings, depicting scenes from the life of the Master, executed by one of Japan's foremost painters, Mr. Kosetu Nosu. The anniversary of the Vihara takes place on the full moon day of November and the festival is celebrated every year by a splendid assembly of monks and lay devotees representing almost every nationality in the world. An important feature of the celebration is the procession of the Holy Relics, the most authentic remains of Lord Buddha, which are enshrined in the altar of the Vihara. Near the Mulagandhakuti Vihara may be seen a modern representative of the Bodhi tree grown out of a sapling brought from Ceylon in 1936.

Sarnath was also a sacred spot to the Jainas who look upon it as the scene of the ascetic practices and death of Sri Amsanatha, the eleventh Jaina Tirthankara. A modern temple situated near the Dhamekh stupa is dedicated to this saint.

The antiquities, so far discovered from the ruins, are numerous and consist of sculptures, bas-reliefs, rail fragments, terra-cotta figurines, seals and sealings, inscriptions, pottery vessels, etc. With very few exceptions they pertain to the Buddhist religion and cover a period of approximately 1500 years, from the 3rd century B.C. to the 12th century A.D. They have been housed in a neat little museum and a sculpture shed, situated near the ruins, which will repay a visit. Beautifully arranged, the sculptures and carvings attract the admiring gaze of the visitor by their fine and graceful execution. The Lion Capital, originally surmounting the Asoka pillar, now occupies a place of honour in the museum hall. It consists of four addorsed

lions supported on an abacus over a bell-shaped lower member. The abacus itself bears relief figures of a lion, an elephant, a bull and a horse. Wonderfully vigorous and treated with simplicity and reserve, these figures are masterly specimens of animal portraits. The capital was originally crowned by a wheel, fragments of which have been recovered from the ruins, and it is said that it was meant to proclaim the suzerainty of the Law which was first made known by the Master at this sanctified spot. Symbolic of India's message of peace and goodwill to the world, the capital now forms the emblem of resurgent India.

Numerous sculptures of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have been unearthed among the ruins. They belong to different periods and it is not possible to refer even to the most important ones. The sculpture dedicated by the friar Bala in the third year of the reign of the Kushana king, Kanishka, shows a type dominated by super-human energy and volume and this type gives place to a refined one permeated by calm and quiet spiritual beatitude and divine grace in the Gupta period. One of the foremost of the sculptures of the latter series is the famous sandstone image of the Master in the act of setting the Wheel of the Law in motion (*dharma-chakrapravartana-mudra*) which has been declared to be a masterpiece of Indian plastic art. The mediaeval sculptures, no less appealing on account of their masterly execution, represent, besides the images of the Master, various other Mahayana divinities, while a few stelae depict the eight conventional events in the life of the Buddha. A large lintel of about the 7th century A.D., which delineates the story of the Kshantivadin Jataka (an episode of one of the previous births of the Master), is interesting for the manner of narration as well as for its plastic treatment. Of the important inscriptions, reference may be made to one on the fragment of a stone umbrella which records the original Pali text enumerating the Four Noble Truths enunciated by the Master in the course of his First Sermon. The inquisitive layman as well as the pious pilgrim will find ample recompense among the ruins of this holy place and in the interesting antiquities in the Museum.



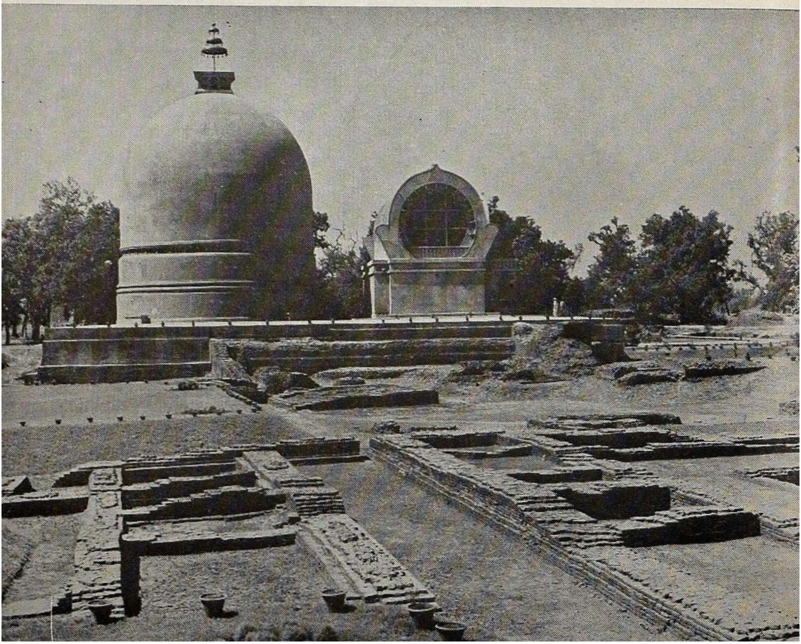
Buddha preaching his first sermon at Sarnath

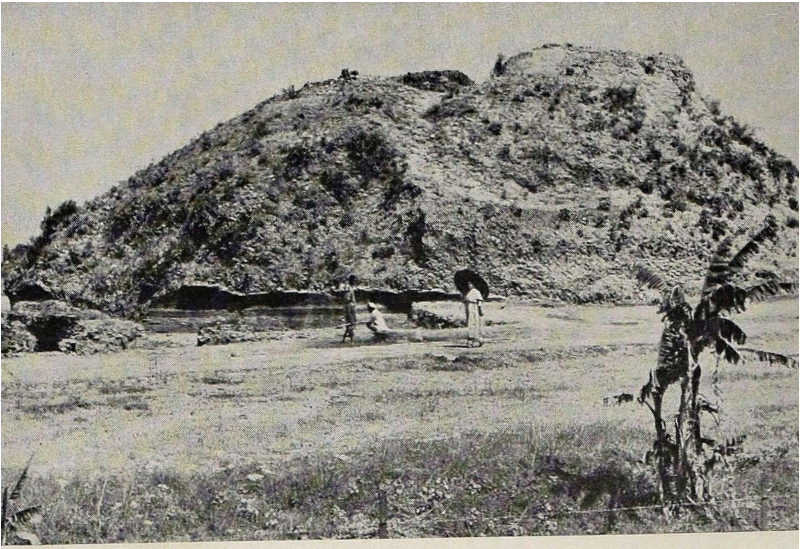
# KUSINAGARA

Kusinagara or Kusinara is sacred to the Buddhists as it was the place where under a grove of *sala* tree the Lord passed into Nirvana in his eightieth year. The site has been identified with Kasia in the Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh.

Like other sacred places connected with the eventful life of the Master, Kusinara also rose to be an important place of pilgrimage and in the course of time became adorned

Nirvana Stupa at Kusinagara





**Ramabhar Stupa marks the holy spot where the Buddha was cremated (Kusinagara)**

with sacred shrines and monasteries. However, for reasons unknown, the place was deserted rather early and both Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang note the utter ruin and desolation of this once important site. The remains that have been laid bare in partial excavations are extremely fragmentary, but the identity of the place with the site of Parinirvana was settled beyond doubt by the discovery of inscriptions referring to the Parinirvana Chaitya. The stupa of Parinirvana, which Asoka is said to have built, has not yet been brought to light. The Parinirvana Chaitya, to which the inscriptions refer, dates from the Gupta period and it is not impossible that the Asoka stupa lies buried underneath the later construction. Among the other sacred edifices that still remain may be mentioned the Matha Kunwar ka Kot which enshrines a large recumbent figure of the Buddha in the unconditioned state of Nirvana. The image was found

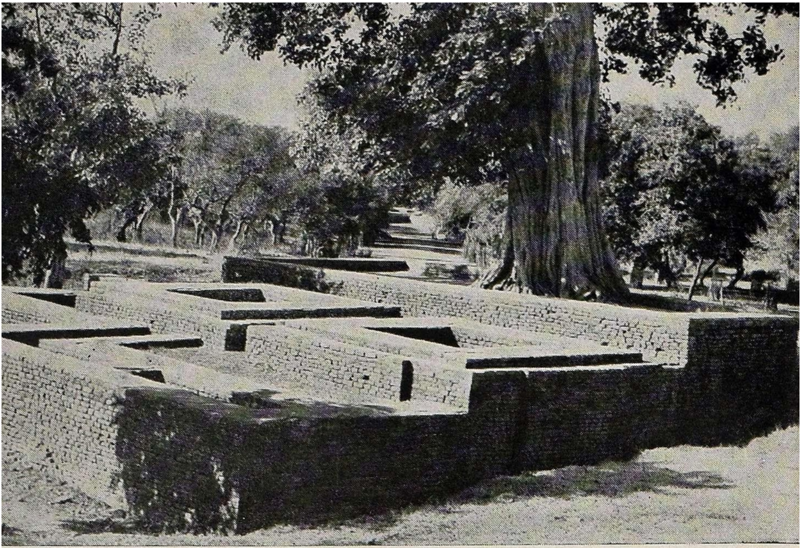
The Mahaparinirvana (Kusinagara)

broken in fragments and had been skilfully restored by Mr. Carlleyle. The great stupa which stood on the spot where the body of the Lord was cremated and where the relics of the Master were divided into eight equal portions is probably represented by a large mound locally known as Ramabhar. This mound has only been partially examined and a more systematic exploration is expected to bring to light important material for the history of this venerable spot of sanctified memory.

# SRAVASTI

Sravasti, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala, is sacred to the Buddhists because it was here that the Master, in accordance with the practice of the previous Buddhas, performed the greatest of his miracles to confound the heretic Tirthika teachers. According to sacred literature this great event consists of a series of miraculous episodes, such as the sun and the moon shining together in the sky, fire and water emanating alternately from the upper and lower parts of the Master's body, and the Buddha creating multiple representations of himself. The Sravasti event has been a favourite theme in Buddhist art from very early times. The earlier representations were usually elaborate ones, depicting successive episodes ultimately leading to the multiple representations of the Buddha which constitute the Great Miracle, *Mahapratiharya*. In later representations the earlier episode, the *Yamakapratiharya*, has been invariably omitted and the scene of the Sravasti miracle has been confined to a stereotyped composition of a central figure of the Buddha in a preaching attitude with similar effigies around.

Even in the days of the Buddha, Sravasti was an active centre of Buddhism and it was here that Anathapindada built, in the garden of Prince Jeta purchased at a fabulous price in gold, a large monastery for the reception of the Master. The story of the purchase of the garden and its eventual presentation to the Lord had been a favourite theme in early Buddhist art. In later times also, shrines and monasteries arose on this sacred spot and it remained a flourishing centre of the faith to a late period.



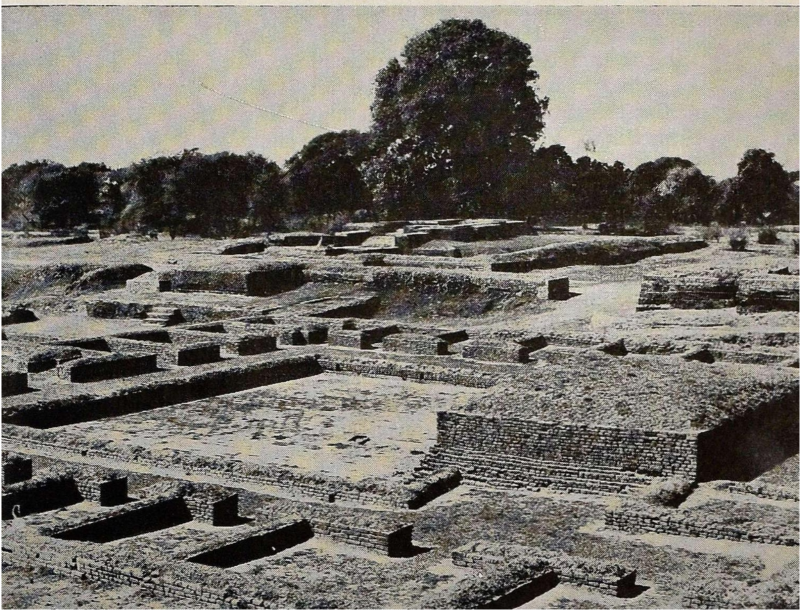
Bodhi Tree at Sravasti (Saheth-Maheth)

Sravasti has been identified with the remains at Saheth-Maheth on the borders of the Gonda and Bahraich districts of Uttar Pradesh and the identification is confirmed by the discovery at Saheth of several inscriptions referring to the convent of Jetavana at Sravasti.

Saheth-Maheth consists of two distinct sites. The larger one, Maheth, covering an area of about 400 acres, has been identified with the remains of the city proper and Saheth, about 32 acres in area and lying about a quarter of a mile to the south west, is the site of the Jetavana monastery. Excavations on the former site have laid bare the remains of the massive gates of the city and also the ruins of other structures, indicating the prosperous state of the city in days gone by. The latter, sanctified by the Master's memorable association, rose to be an important place of pilgrimage and became adorned with numerous shrines, stupas and monasteries. The remains that have been exposed date approximately from the Mauryan epoch down to the expiring

days of Buddhism in the 12th century A.D. One of the earliest stupas, the original foundation of which may go back to the 3rd century B.C., if not earlier, contained some bone relics, probably pertaining to the Master himself. A colossal statue of the Master, dedicated by the friar Bala (1st century A.D.)—the same Bala who erected a similar statue at Sarnath in the 3rd year of the reign of Kanishka—was found at the site and may now be seen in the Indian Museum in Calcutta. The remains unearthed testify to the flourishing condition of this sacred site in the Gupta and mediaeval periods also. One of the latest patrons of the establishment was Kumaradevi, the queen of Govindachandra, the Gahadavala king of Kanauj, who donated some land for the maintenance of the Jetavana monastery in A.D. 1128-29. Buddhism had already been on the decline and the prosperity of this memorable site was finally eclipsed as a result of the Islamic occupation of the land.

**Remains of monasteries at Sravasti**

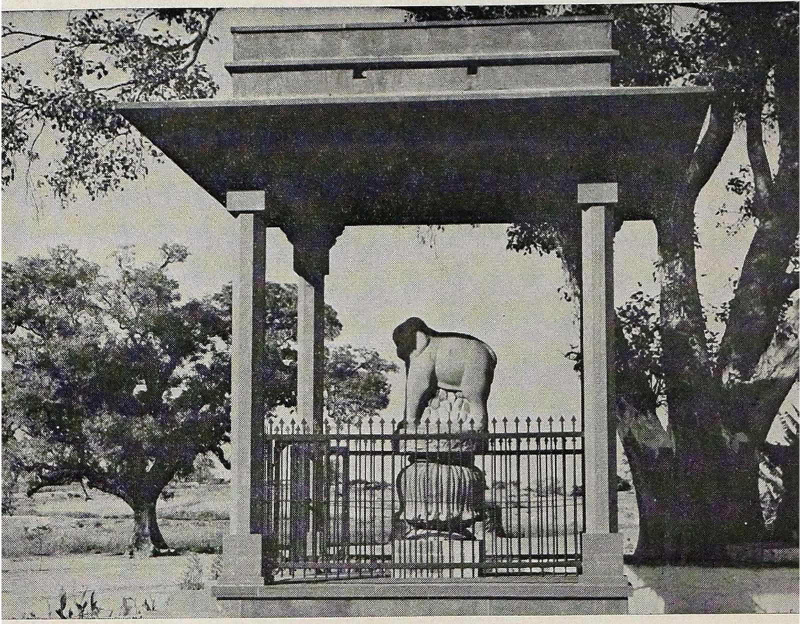


## SANKASYA

Another holy spot connected with the life of the Master was Sankasya, where the Buddha is said to have descended to the earth from the *Tryastrimsa* Heaven (Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods) where he went to preach the Abhidhamma to his mother and other gods. This event is said to have occurred after the Great Miracle performed at Sravasti, as it was a fixed law that all Buddhas would resort to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods after performing their greatest miracles. According to Buddhist legends, the Lord came down by a triple ladder, accompanied by the gods Brahma and Sakra, and the incident forms a favourite motif in Buddhist art. On account of these sacred associations Sankasya came to be an important place of pilgrimage, and shrines, stupas and monasteries adorned the site in the heyday of Buddhism.

Sankasya has been identified with Sankisa, also known as Sanisa Basantapur, in the Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Not only are the two names similar but an additional confirmation is to be had from the existence at the site of an elephant capital which scholars assume to have originally surmounted an Asoka pillar.

Both Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang visited the place and have left interesting accounts of the important monuments. On account of long neglect, however, all is now in crumbling ruins. The accounts of the Chinese pilgrims are also too meagre to admit of any proper identification of the extant remains. The present village is perched on a mound, locally known as the "fort", 41 feet high and extending 1,500 feet by 1,000 feet. A quarter of a mile to the south is



Sankasya Elephant Capital (Sankasya)

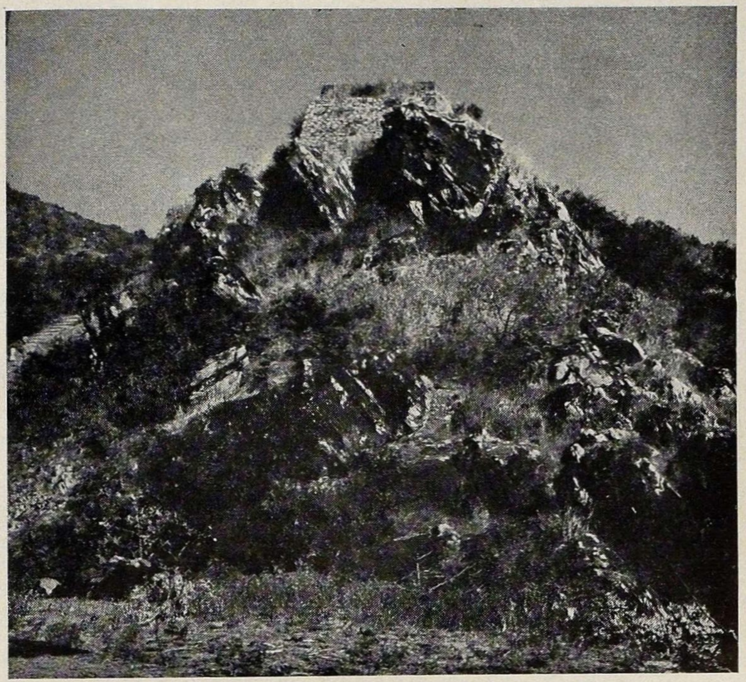
another mound, composed of solid brick-work and surmounted by a temple dedicated to Bisari Devi. Other mounds containing masses of brick-work may be seen scattered around and there are also the remains of an earthen rampart upwards of 3½ miles in circumference. The trial diggings, undertaken long ago by Cunningham, indicate the extremely fragmentary nature of the remains and also the urgent necessity of proper and more systematic explorations. The elephant capital, referred to above, is an important relic of the days of Asoka and further explorations are expected to lay bare important material for the history of this sacred spot.

# RAJAGRIHA

Rajagriha, the capital of the powerful kingdom of Magadha, was sacred to the Buddhists for reasons more than one. Not only did the Master retire several times to this famous city, but it was also the place where Devadatta, his wicked cousin, made many attempts to encompass his death. Moreover, in this city, in the Sattapanni (Saptaparni) cave of the Vaibhara hill was held the first Buddhist Council (*Sangiti*) just after the Parinirvana. The Vinaya and the Dharma were rehearsed in this Council and were fixed with the assistance of Upali and Ananda. The principal points of the Creed and Discipline were thus agreed upon and the stability of the new religion assured. Rajagriha was thus sacred to the followers of Buddhism, not only on account of its association with the founder of the religion but also because of the important part that this city played in the growth and development of the good faith, Saddharma.

The city of Rajagriha is represented by the ruins of Rajgir, now a hill-girt town in the Patna district of Bihar.

A famous city in ancient times, Rajgir was known by more names than one, such as Girivraja (with reference to its topographical position—a city surrounded by hills), Rajagriha (the abode of kings), Vasumati (from the mystical king Vasu Uparichara who, according to the Ramayana, was the founder of the city), Barhadrathapura (from Brihadratha, father of King Jarasandha of the Mahabharata fame and founder of the Barhadratha dynasty of Magadhan kings), Kusagrapura, which means the city of superior grass according to Hiuen Tsang, Magadhapura (with reference to Magadha of which it was the capital city) and



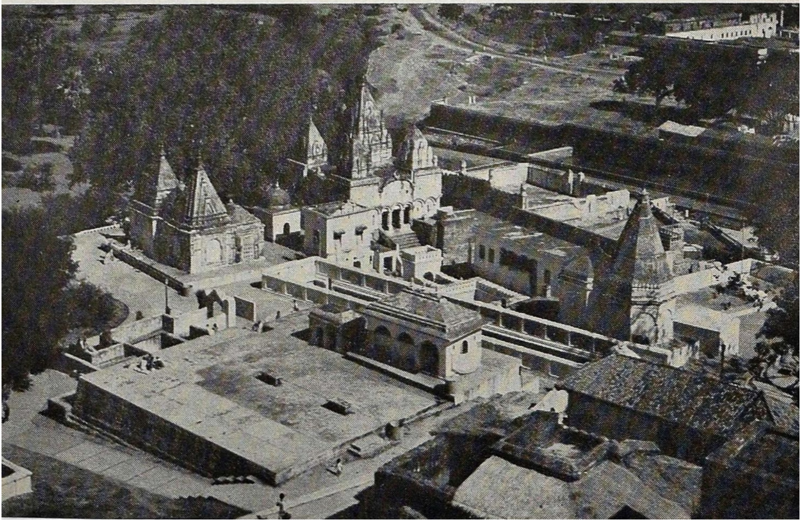
The sacred Gridhrakuta hill—a favourite resort of the Buddha (Rajagriha)

Bimbisarapuri (from king Bimbisara, a contemporary of the Buddha, who initiated an era of expansion of Magadha). Girivraja or old Rajagriha was situated in the area enclosed by the hills called differently in early literature, but now known as Vaibhara, Vipula, Ratna, Chatha, Udayagiri and Sonagiri. Fortified all around by two lines of walls and with the natural protection offered by the guarding hills, the city was as impregnable as it could be in those days, and the Mahabharata aptly describes it as *durdharsha*. Beyond the hills to the north stood the new city, the foundation of which was attributed to Ajatasatru, the son and successor of Bimbisara and a young contemporary of the Buddha.

Udayin, the son and successor of Ajatasatru, built the city of Kusumapura (Pataliputra) and also probably transferred the capital there. Though Sisunaga, a later king, might have resorted to the old capital, it was Kalasoka who finally transferred the capital to Pataliputra, and Rajagriha lost the rank of a royal city. In spite of its decline in political prestige, the city continued long to enjoy importance and popularity, due not only to its sacred association with the history of Buddhism but also for its connections with other religious creeds.

The remains of the ancient city, now above surface, are few and far between. It appears that the site has suffered much from the ravages of time. The ruins indicate that the followers of different religious denominations lived here. The Buddhist remains, except for stray and isolated images here and there, are particularly scanty, and it is not impossible that the denudation of the surface of visible monuments was also partly due to religious animosities. Even the identification of the Sattapanni cave, the site of the first Council, is not beyond doubt. According to the canonical text, the cave was situated on the northern

View of Rajagriha



fringe of the Vaibhara hill and Stein may probably be right when he identifies the site with the large terrace with a group of cells at the back in a semi-circular bend of the rock on the northern scarp. A remarkable structure, known as Jarasandha ki Baithak, on the eastern slope of the Vaibhara hill with irregular cells at the sides is sought to be identified with the residence of Pippala, mentioned in some of the Buddhist texts and in the itinerary of the Chinese pilgrims. Some of the Pali texts describe the Pippala cave as the residence of Mahakasyapa, the organiser of the first Council. From the cyclopean masonry, analogous to that of the city walls and its bastioned gateway, this erection is, however, more of a military than secular or religious character. A mound to the west of the citadel is usually connected with a stupa, built by Ajatasatru according to Fa-hien, and by Asoka according to Hiuen Tsang. Trial diggings on this mound have exposed several strata, none of which can be dated, however, to the pre-Christian epoch. The cave known as the Sonbhandar, on the southern scarp of the Vaibhara hill, might have been a Buddhist excavation, though the possibility of its having been a Jaina establishment cannot be entirely ruled out. The cave is believed by the local people to have a great amount of gold hidden in a closet. The Gridhrakuta mountain, which was a favourite resort of the Buddha, is situated close to the city.

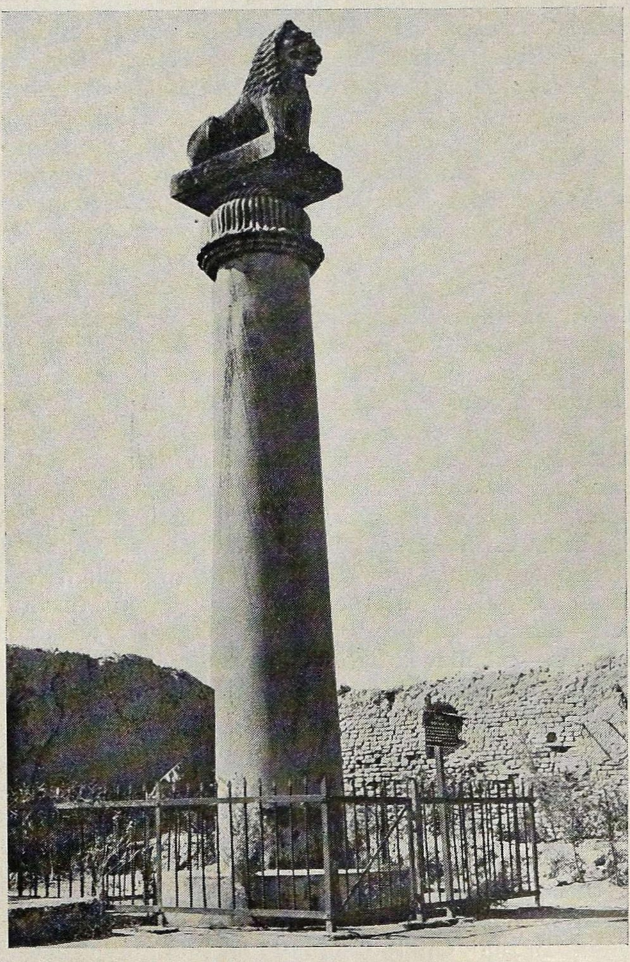
Rajagriha was also an active centre of Jainism in ancient times as it is now, and interesting remains of Jaina shrines and sculptures are extant. A singular monument may be recognised in the cylindrical brick shrine, almost in the centre of the city, known as Maniyar Matha, dedicated, according to local tradition, to the worship of Mani Naga, the guardian deity of the city of Rajagriha. Local tradition also connects some of the old sites of Rajgir, the city of Jarasandha of the Mahabharata fame, with the epic accounts of Jarasandha. In spite of the scantiness of the Buddhist relics, the very association of the city with the legend and history of Buddhism is sufficient to inspire a pilgrimage to this picturesque spot. Girt by protective ranges of hills and invigorated by pleasant climate, Rajgir, with its hot springs, is also a health resort.

## VAISALI

The city of Vaisali, the capital of the powerful Lichchhavi clan, was in the early days a stronghold of Buddhism. Gautama Buddha is said to have visited it three times during his lifetime. In one of these visits, several monkeys are said to have offered the lord a pot of honey, an incident that finds mention among the eight great events in the life of the Master. It was here again that the Buddha announced his approaching Nirvana and after his Nirvana the Lichchhavis are said to have erected a stupa over their share of the remains of the Master. A little over 100 years after the Nirvana, here was held the second Buddhist Council which was of supreme importance in the history of latter-day Buddhism. To the Jainas also Vaisali was equally sacred, being the birth place of Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Jaina Tirthankara.

The city of Vaisali is represented by the ruins of Raja Bisal Ka Garh at Basarh and the adjoining regions in the Muzaffarpur district of Bihar.

The site of Raja Bisal Ka Garh is believed to represent the citadel of the ancient city of Vaisali. It consists of a large brick-covered mound, about 8 feet from the surrounding level, and slightly less than a mile in circumference. Originally surrounded by a ditch, it was approached by a broad embanked causeway from the south. Trial diggings have exposed foundations of the old buildings, very irregular in plan, which may date back to the Gupta period. All these buildings were purely secular. The most interesting finds consist of a large number of clay seals, official and private, the latter bearing the names of individuals or guilds of merchants, bankers and traders. The



Lion Pillar (Kolhua)

official seals indicate that in the Gupta period Vaisali was an important administrative headquarter, and an interesting seal, engraved in characters of the Maurya period, refers to the patrol outpost at Vaisali. A study of the various

devices impressed on these seals is expected to bear fruitful results for the social and religious history of India.

The Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang, visited Vaisali in course of their travels. The latter describes the city as having occupied an area of 10 to 12 square miles. He says that both within and without and all around the town of Vaisali the sacred monuments are so many that it would be difficult to enumerate them. Unfortunately the area is now practically denuded of any visible remains of religious edifices.

At Kolhua, two miles to the north-west of Raja Bisal Ka Garh, there stands a monolithic pillar (locally known as Bhimsen-ki Lath) of highly polished sandstone surmounted by a bell-shaped capital that supports the sedent figure of a lion on a square abacus. It is about 22 feet above the present ground level, a considerable portion having sunk underground through the accumulation of ages. In style it resembles the edict pillars of Asoka, but diggings round the shaft have failed to discover any inscription of Asoka on it. Yet it can be identified with one of the Asoka pillars mentioned by Hiuen Tsang at the site of ancient Vaisali. The line of pillars in the Champaran and Muzaffarpur districts—Rampurwa, Lauriya Araraj, Lauriya Nandangarh and Kolhua—is believed to have marked the stages of a royal journey from Pataliputra to Lumbini which Asoka undertook in the 20th year of his consecration. Nearby, to the south, there is a small tank, called Rama Kund, identified by Cunningham with the ancient Markata-hrada, or "monkey's tank", believed to have been dug by a colony of monkeys for the use of the Buddha. To the north-west there is a ruined mound, at present only 15 feet high and with a diameter of about 65 feet at the base, which has been identified with the remains of the Asoka stupa mentioned by Hiuen Tsang. On the summit of this mound stands a modern brick temple enshrining a mediaeval image of the Buddha. The whole area is under extensive cultivation, but small eminences, scattered here and there, evidently mark the sites of ancient buildings and urgently call for a thorough and more systematic exploration for the reconstruction of the history of this sacred place.

## SITES OF IMPORTANT MONUMENTS

It will not be out of place to recount also a few other memorable sites of Buddhism—the sites of sacred shrines, stupas and monasteries. In course of the development of Buddhism in India such sites, though not particularly associated with the life and legend of the Buddha, rose to prominence on account of the imposing monuments that grew up in and around them. Wherever Buddhism has spread it has left its visible traces in the form of a domical structure which goes by the name of the stupas. It is the most sacred of Buddhist monuments, being particularly connected with the enshrinement of the relics. In the *Mahaparinibbana Suttanta* the Buddha enjoins Ananda to erect at the crossing of the four highways a stupa over the remains of his body after it has been burnt on the funeral pyre. According to sacred tradition, his remains were divided into eight equal portions immediately after the Parinirvana and eight stupas were erected over them. Tradition also credits Asoka with the erection of 84,000 stupas.

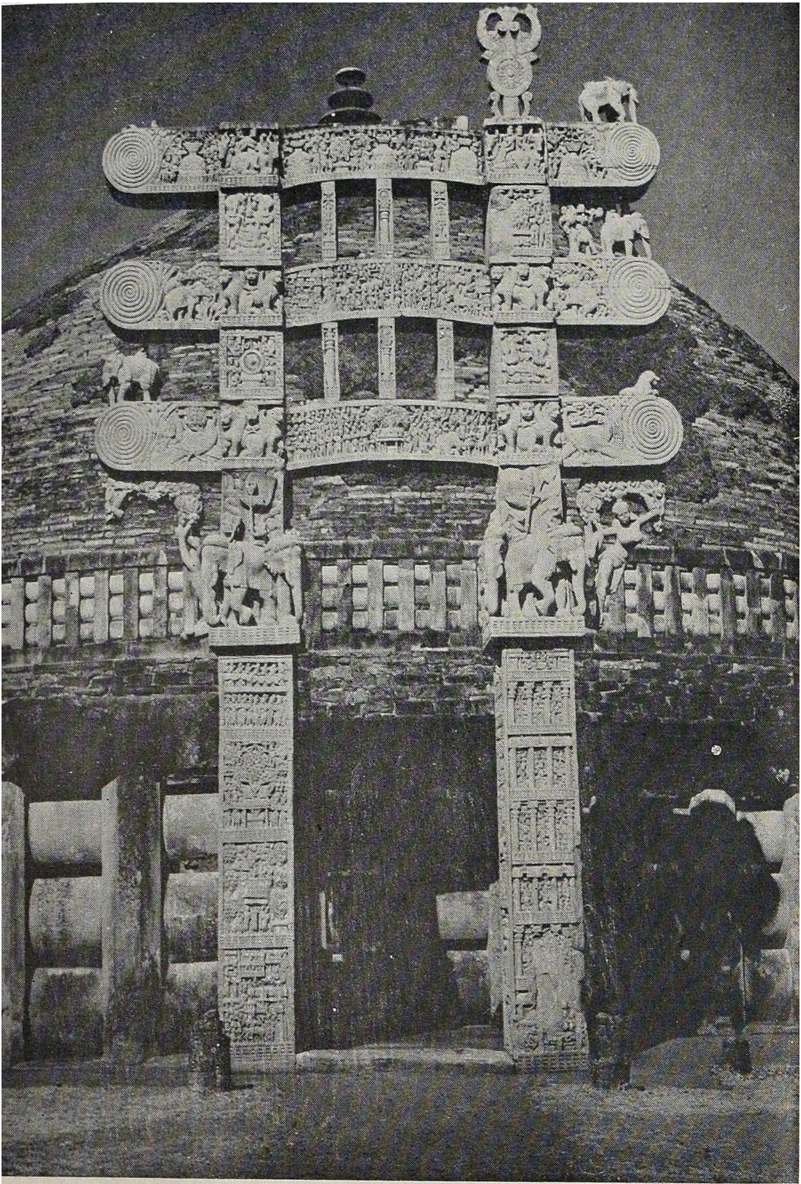
As a monumental reliquary, the stupa was held extremely sacred by the Buddhists, and before the introduction of the image of the Lord the stupa was frequently used to symbolise the Master himself. As such it was the centre and focus of the devotion and adoration of the followers of Buddhism. In this votive aspect the stupas were known as chaityas, and such structures were set up as votive objects in special sanctuaries, known as chaitya halls. A sanctuary of this type usually took the shape of a long rectangular hall with an apsidal end and a barrel-vaulted roof. The extant remains are mostly of

the excavated order, though remains of structural chaitya halls have also been laid bare in various sacred sites of Buddhism. Monumental stupas, too, were raised as well as small ones as pious gifts, the gift of a stupa being reckoned as meritorious as that of an image, even when the latter had come into prolific use. The monastic order (*Sangha*) was already established during the life-time of the Master and residences for monks (*Sangharamas* or *Viharas*), i.e., monasteries, also formed important accompaniments of sacred establishments even from very early times. A monastery was usually planned in the shape of ranges of residential cells round a central quadrangular court. Monasteries of the structural kind have mostly perished, but an idea of the grandeur and magnificence of such institutions may be had from monastic establishments of the rock-cut order.

It is not possible here to give even a brief reference to all the important sites of Buddhism with the different types of monuments described above. Many of such sites, as for example, Taxila, Purushapura and other sites of Gandhara, are now in West Pakistan while the great Sonapura Mahavihara, the largest single Buddhist monastery, is now in East Pakistan. The earliest extant stupa, and also the most imposing one, is situated at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. The site grew to be a most extensive establishment with magnificent stupas, shrines and monasteries and justifies a brief treatment here.

Important stupas and monasteries, besides those already noted in connection with the sites described above, existed at Piprawa, Bhattiprolu, Bharhut, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, etc., but the remains are extremely fragmentary and these sites, except the sculptural remains in some cases, bear no trace of their past splendour. The chaitya halls and the monasteries of the excavated order are represented by a series of monuments in western India (Bhaja, Bedsa, Kanheri, Nasik, Junnar, Karle, etc.), at Bagh in Madhya Pradesh and at Aurangabad in Maharashtra. This series of monuments finds its grandest expression in the caves at Ajanta and Ellora, both in Maharashtra. These two sites are well known all over the world and in an account of the

Buddhist shrines of India they deserve a short description. Of the mediaeval monasteries Nalanda in Bihar acquired a fame and reputation throughout the then Buddhist world. It existed down to the last days of Buddhism in India and it will be proper to conclude the account of the Buddhist shrines of India with a description of this far-famed institution.



Eastern Gateway of the Great Stupa (Sanchi)

# SANCHI

Sanchi is the site of the most extensive Buddhist remains now known in India. The site had no apparent connection with the traditional history of Gautama Buddha; the place is scarcely mentioned in Buddhist literature. Even the itineraries of the Chinese pilgrims, which are a mine of information about other ancient centres of Buddhism, do not refer to the site at all. It is surprising, therefore, that the monuments at Sanchi should now be the most magnificent and perfect examples of Buddhist art in India. In the circumstances, there is considerable force in the view that Sanchi is the modern representative of Chetiyargiri of the Ceylonese chronicle in the neighbourhood of Vidisa, connected with the story of Asoka's marriage with a merchant's daughter and the erection of a monastery on the hill where Mahendra, Asoka's son by that marriage, is said to have halted on the way to his proselytising mission to Ceylon. Whether the story is true or not, the fact remains that the earliest monuments at Sanchi date from the time of Asoka and it is not impossible that it was the patronage of this Constantine of Buddhism which turned the place into an active centre of the religion of Gautama Buddha and was responsible for the splendour of the site in days gone by.

Most of the monuments are situated on a plateau on the hill top which was enclosed by a wall of solid stone about A.D. 1100. Of the stupas there are many, dating from the 3rd century B.C. to the 12th century A.D., and in size they range from the Great Stupa, 100 feet in diameter at the base, with its vast imposing dome, nearly 50 feet high, down to miniature ones no more than a foot high. Originally built of brick in the time of Asoka, the Great

Stupa was enlarged to nearly twice its previous size and covered with stone perhaps a century later when stone railings and gateways were added. As it now stands, it consists of an almost hemispherical dome, truncated near the top, and supported on a sloping circular terrace. This was approached by a broad double ramp on the southern side. On the berm of this terrace and around its base there are two circumambulation passages (*pradakshinapatha*), each of which is enclosed by a balustrade of stone. On the summit of the dome was a third balustrade surrounding the sacred parasol which invariably crowned these monuments as the emblem of the suzerainty of the religion of the Blessed One.

The massive balustrade on the ground has four imposing gateways, on the four cardinal faces, which with their richly carved decorations constitute a most striking contrast with the simplicity of the structure behind. All the four gateways are of similar design, and the technique employed in the construction of the balustrades and gateways indicates that they are rather the work of carpenters than of stone-masons. Each gateway consists of two square pillars surmounted by capitals, which in their turn support a superstructure of three architraves with voluted ends, ranged one above the other at intervals, slightly in excess of their own height. The capitals are adorned with standing dwarfs or with the forefronts of lions or elephants set back to back. Springing from the same abacus and acting as supports to the projecting ends of the lowest architrave are caryatids of graceful and pleasing outline. The figures of men and women, horsemen, elephants and lions are disposed between and above the architraves, while crowning and dominating all is the sacred wheel, the symbol of the law of the Buddha, flanked on either side by attendants and *triratna* emblems. The gateways, in strong contrast to the balustrades, are richly carved, both pillars and superstructure being elaborately enriched with bas-reliefs illustrative of the Jataka legends, or scenes from the life of the Master or of important events in the subsequent history of the religion. To the student of Buddhist lore these reliefs present an interesting study, but this is not the place to deal with

this matter, even in brief. Reference must be made, however, to one singular panel in an architrave of one of the gateways, representing the visit of Asoka to the Bodhi tree at Bodh-Gaya. The greatest patron of Buddhism has not been portrayed in any other monument in India. Though this portrait of the Emperor may not be authentic, this unique representation of one of the greatest figures of Indian history must be cherished by all his countrymen.

These innumerable reliefs with their multitudinous figures and elaborate details must have taken many years to carve and complete uniformity of style cannot be expected. But nowhere do we find among them any sign of crude or immature workmanship. Spontaneity and naturalism are evident in the free and easy postures of the figures and in their naive compositions with depth and perspective. The action expressed is intensely sincere and highly dramatic. The art that these reliefs exhibit had its root in the heart and in the faith of the people and gave eloquent expression to their spiritual beliefs, as well as to their deep and intuitive sympathy with nature. "Free alike from artificiality and idealism its purpose was to glorify religion. . . by telling the story of Buddhism in the simplest and most expressive language that the chisel of the sculptor could demand and it is just because of their sympathy and transparent sincerity that these carvings voiced so truthfully the soul of the people and still continue to make an appeal to our feelings."

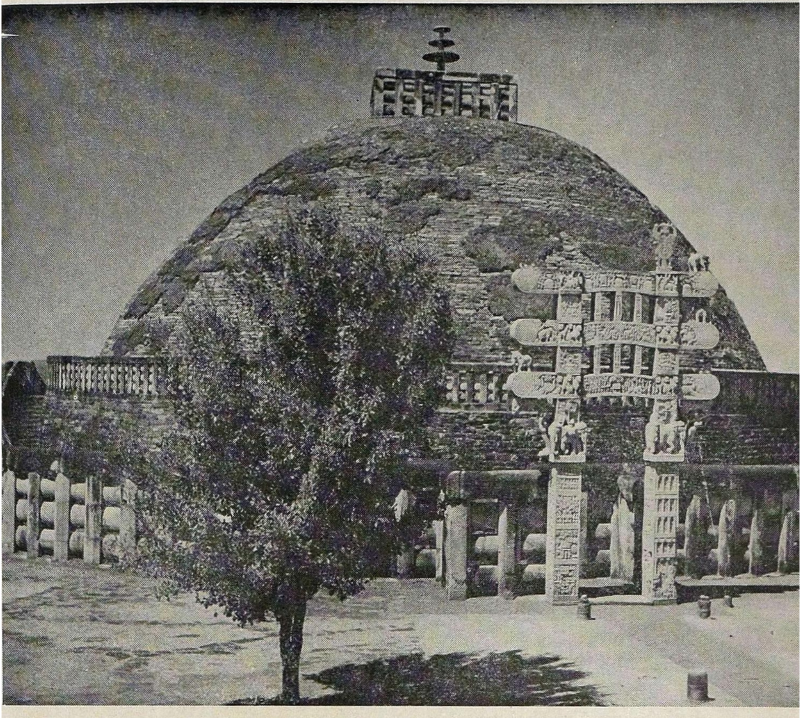
Of the many other stupas on this site three are particularly remarkable. One of these, stupa No. 3, is situated to the north-east of the Great Stupa and is of almost identical design, though of smaller dimensions. In the Relic Chamber of this stupa General Cunningham discovered the relics of Sariputta and Mahamoggallana, two of the famous disciples of the Lord, the relics that have been brought back from London and consecrated in a new shrine at Sanchi. In ancient days this stupa must have been invested with a special sanctity. The other stupa, No. 2, stands on a ledge of rock halfway down the western side of the hill. Here, though there is no gateway, the rail round the base is almost intact and exhibits a variety of interesting reliefs

of primitive workmanship, in striking contrast to the more advanced art of the gateway sculptures of the Great Stupa. These reliefs show an extremely crude treatment of living figures coupled with an extraordinary power of decorative design. Another small stupa near the foot of the hill on the western side enshrined the relics of Kasyapa and Mogaliputta, well-known Buddhist apostles of the 3rd century B.C. Apart from its sanctity on this account this stupa is also interesting for its carved medallions on the railings and well-sculptured scenes on the gateways.

In the region are found scattered groups of stupas of which a few are held in utmost sanctity on account of the relics enshrined in them. At Sonari, a few miles from Sanchi, there is a group of eight stupas of which two are important structures in square courtyards, and from one of these, numerous relics were exhumed. At Satdhara, three miles farther on, there are two stupas the smaller one of which yielded relics, again of Sariputta and others such as those found at Sanchi. At Bhojpur, seven miles from Sanchi, and at Andher, five miles farther, there are interesting groups of stupas, a few with important relics. Among these stupas, which invest the entire region with a special sanctity for the followers of the Buddhist faith, there is none that can be assumed to belong to a period earlier than that of Asoka, nor any that can have been built later than the 1st century A.D.

Of more historical value are the battered remains of the Asoka pillar, with its capital of four lions back to back, which is situated close to the south gate of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. On its broken stump one can still find the edict in which the Emperor forbids, in strong terms, any schism in the Church. With its lustrous polish, its design and style, it ranks among the better known of the edict pillars of Asoka.

The chief fascination of Sanchi no doubt rests on these grand old stupas, not only on account of their sanctity but also because of their rich and elaborate carvings. The fascination is vastly enhanced by the shrines and monasteries that cluster around them and give a vivid picture of monastic life on this peaceful hill top. Among



The Great Stupa (Sanchi)

these, the most noteworthy is the Chaitya Hall (Temple No. 18), situated directly opposite the south gateway of the Great Stupa, and is especially interesting as one of the few examples of structural edifices of this kind. The present remains, though a mere skeleton, have a peculiar charm in the classic simplicity of their columns. The pillars and walls, now exposed to view, date back no farther than the 7th century A.D., but beneath them lie the remains of three older chapels which successively occupied the same site.

Another structure recalling the classic temples of Greece may be seen in a tiny unpretentious shrine (Temple No. 17) consisting of nothing more than a simple flat-roofed

square chamber with a pillared portico in front. Though modest in dimension, its structural propriety, symmetry and proportions, appreciation for plain surfaces and restraint in ornament may very well be compared with the best creations of classical Greek architecture. Belonging probably to the 4th century A.D. this temple is important for historical reasons also. The period of the Guptas ushered in a new age in the history of Indian temple architecture and the nucleus of a temple—a cubical cella (*garbha-griha*) with a single entrance and porch (*mandapa*)—appears for the first time in this simple flat-roofed shrine and supplies the basis for future elaborations that, through successive stages, developed into such supreme creations as the great Lingaraja at Bhubaneswar, the celebrated Sun temple at Konarak, and the splendid Kandarya Mahadeo at Khajuraho.

Of monasteries there are five examples at Sanchi and they range in date from the 4th to the 12th century A.D. The earlier ones, once occupying the site, were built of wood and have perished or been buried under the foundations of later structures. Those that have survived or are now exposed to view are built more or less on the usual plan of a quadrangular open court with ranges of two-storeyed apartments surrounding it. The most interesting of the monastic establishments now occupies the highest part of the plateau to the east. It consisted of several courts surrounded by monastic cells with a lofty shrine of the Buddha on the eastern side of what was evidently the principal court.

The incomparable monuments of Sanchi were rescued from centuries of oblivion as early as 1818 and a host of scholars and archaeologists have tried to resuscitate this memorable site. The major part of the exploration and restoration work goes to the credit of Sir John Marshall, a former Director General of Archaeology in India, who has not only excavated the numerous remains, but has also re-created them. He has restored them to some semblance of their former selves and the imaginative visitor who wanders through the exposed ruins is now in a position to visualise the past splendour of this vast and memorable site of antiquity.

# AJANTA AND ELLORA

Two of the most remarkable sites of Buddhism are situated in Maharashtra. In a narrow gorge, amidst superb scenery, lie the marvellous caves of Ajanta, five of them chaityas (shrines) and the remainder viharas (monasteries). Hewn from the living rock, richly sculptured and with walls, pillars and ceilings of some of the caves adorned with paintings, they furnish a continuous narrative of Buddhist art during a period of 800 years and no ancient remains in India exhibit such an admirable combination of architecture, sculpture and painting. The stupendous caves of Ellora are excavated in the scarp of a large rocky plateau. Unlike Ajanta, Ellora presents us with remarkable memorials of the three great faiths of India —Buddhism, Brahmanism and Jainism. The far-famed Brahmanical Kailasa temple, representing a vast carved monolith, with its colossal size, spacious court, massive pillars and colonnades, intricate galleries, painted ceilings, huge sculptures and extravagant decoration—all hewn vertically out of the heart of the rock—is a wonder in the world of art.

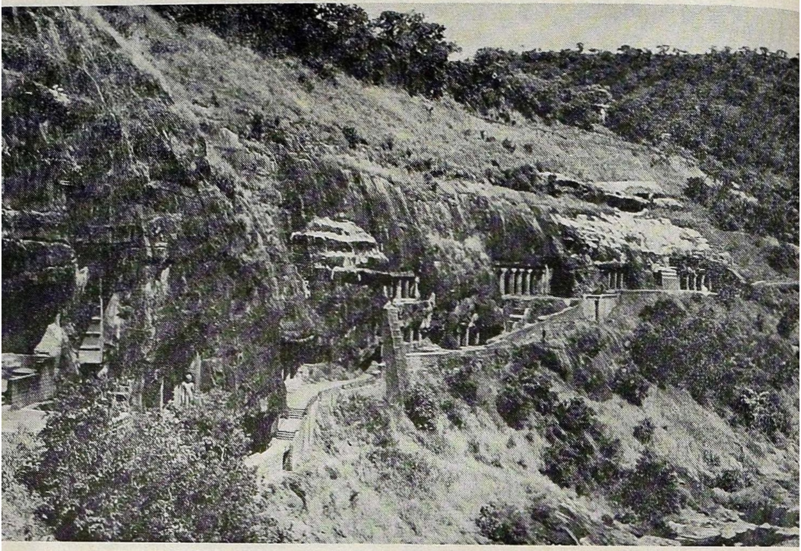
The caves of Ajanta date from the later centuries of the pre-Christian era, and taken in chronological order they constitute a complete record of the development of this type of monuments. The most ancient excavations are situated in the centre of the series, caves IX and X being the earliest of the chaitya halls at Ajanta. From these chaitya halls of the earlier type, with facade ornamentations consisting chiefly of architectural motifs, to caves XIX and XXVI, with the excessive multiplication of the figure of the Buddha

Facade of Cave XIX (Ajanta)

to the exclusion of almost every other form of decoration, there is a great gap indicating significant changes in the psychology and outlook of the votaries for whom the later caves were meant. In plan and arrangement they were not far removed from their earlier prototypes but there is a gulf of difference in the style of ornamentation, which are not only far richer in design and more finished in execution but also belong to a different school of thought. The most significant innovation may be recognised in the wealth of figure sculptures which are made to cover every possible space in the exterior as well as in the interior. Everywhere, even on the votive chaitya itself, appear figures of the Buddha, the "Worshipful One", standing or seated, superbly carved in bold relief. The embellishment of these cathedrals is a magnificent paean in stone in honour of the deified Teacher and from pure atheism of the earlier caves we have passed to overwhelming idolatry.

The monastic caves were planned like the structural viharas with only this unavoidable difference that the inner open court took the shape of a central hall with a pillared verandah on one side and ranges of apartments on the other three. The majority of the Ajanta caves represent monasteries and of these caves XII and XIII belong to the earlier group, coeval in date with the chaitya halls IX and X. The hall in the earlier group is astylar, but soon columned halls begin to appear, the earliest example of such an arrangement at Ajanta being cave XI. A period of hesitancy in the proper method of columnation follows until a more harmonious and unified design is evolved in the system of colonnades on all the four sides of the hall. Besides lending support, this ordered design added to the interior effect of the cave and the rich decorative embellishments of the columns created an effect of magnificence which is enhanced further, in some of the caves, by elaborate paintings.

The most important of this kind are caves XVI, XVII, I and II, the former two excavated about A.D. 500 and the latter about a century later. Each of these viharas is further characterised by a chapel, containing a figure of the Buddha, recessed at the back end of the hall. All these



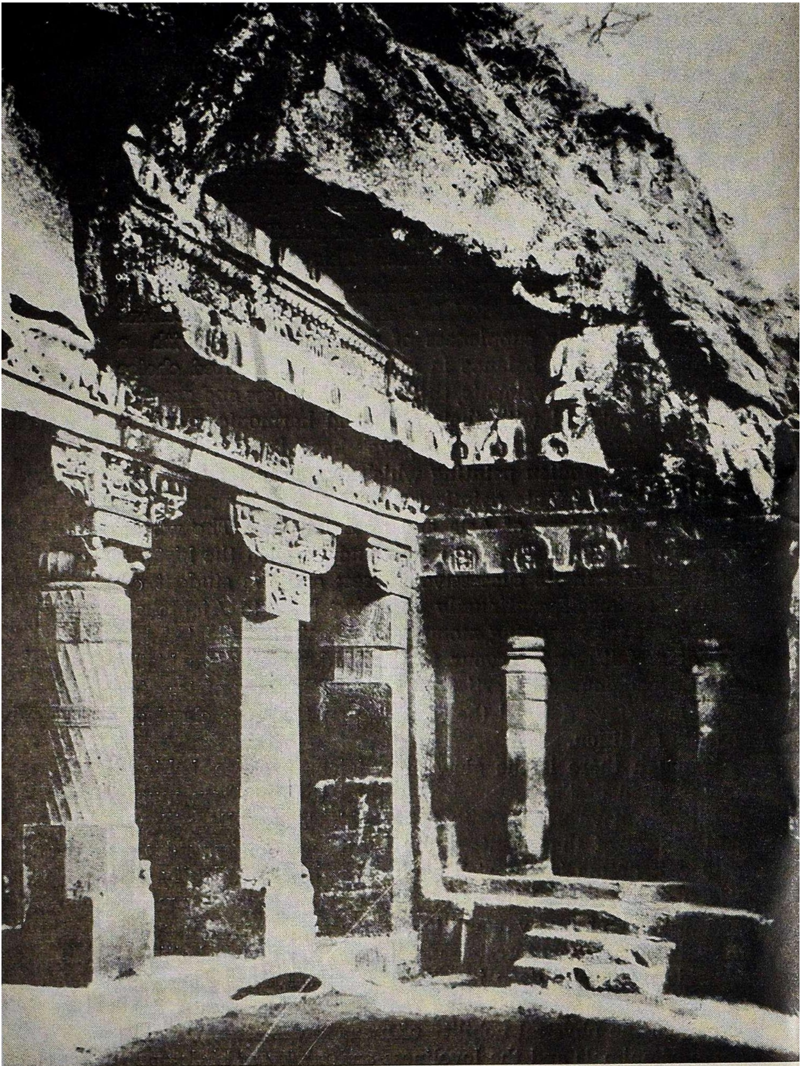
General view of the Ajanta caves

caves are remarkable for the spaciousness of their halls and the great variety and beauty of their pillars. Though infinitely varied, no two of any type being exactly alike, there is a general harmony of design and form which prevents their variety from being unpleasing. The pillared frontage with its richly carved architraves is no less magnificent.

But the glory of Ajanta lies in the scheme and grandeur of its paintings. Praised alike by scholars and artists, the paintings may be divided into narrative scenes, portraiture and decoration. The narrative scenes, i.e., the illustrations of the Jataka stories and of the incidents of the life of Gautama Buddha, perforce take pride of place. The portraits include representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas and also figures of Brahmanical divinities. The decoration consists of a bewildering variety of motifs and forms.

Like the caves themselves the paintings also belong to widely separate chronological groups—one belonging to the pre-Christian era and the other to the 6th-7th century A.D. The earlier group bears strong resemblances to contemporary sculptures of Bharhut and Sanchi, and represents an art of some maturity—a bold style of painting emphasised by spirited and vigorous outline. This style reaches its culmination in the marvellous paintings of the later group, as seen in caves XVI, XVII, I and II. In their excellent composition, their suppleness of modulated form with a natural poise and balance in spite of an unlimited choice of postures and movements, their expressiveness and graphic quality, combined with their deep and harmonious colour and flowing and sensitive line, we have here the classical school of Indian painting which exercised far-reaching influence. The Ajanta paintings are of outstanding significance to the history of Asia and of Asian art. The whole course of art in eastern Asia is bound up with the history of Buddhism in its successive phases; and the student of art finds himself continually referring back to Ajanta as the one great surviving monument of painting created by Buddhist faith and fervour in the land which gave birth to that religion. The artists of all Buddhist countries in Asia may have derived their inspiration from the classical Ajanta tradition.

Though there is the glow of religious impulse behind the creation of these superb paintings, their authors must constantly have mixed with the world. The walls, pillars and ceiling of the Ajanta caves constitute the back drop of a vast drama in the rich exuberance and complexity of life, a drama played by heroes, princes and sages, by men and women of every condition, against a marvellously varied scene, among forests and gardens, in courts and cities, in wide plains and deep jungles. "From all these emanate a great joy in the surpassing radiance of the face of the world, in the physical nobility of men, in the strength and grace of animals and the loveliness and purity of birds and flowers; and woven into this fabric of material beauty we see the ordered pattern of the spiritual realities of the universe."



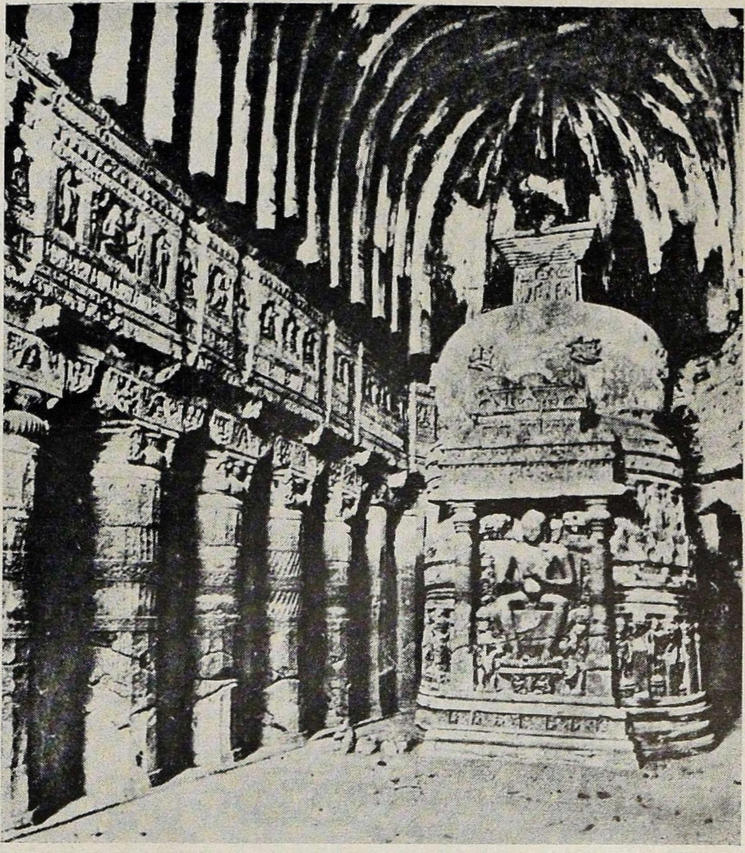
Entrance to Cave I (Ajanta)

Among the caves at Ellora the twelve along the southern end of the ridge form the Buddhist series. The Brahmanical and the Jaina caves also exhibit interesting developments in cave excavations. The Buddhist caves cover probably two centuries of activity, approximately between A.D. 550 and 750. Of these, the Visvakarma cave (No. X) represents a chaitya hall which, though almost identical with the two latest shrines at Ajanta, shows a significant change in the disposition of the facade. One misses here the enormous horse-shoe opening, the chaitya window, which gave such a distinctive character to the frontages of such shrines. This transformation of the traditional facade is probably a foretaste of what was destined to come soon. This is further reflected in the apsidal end of the interior of the hall being entirely blocked up by the votive chaitya, which now serves as a substantial background to the colossal image of the Buddha, the principal object of veneration.

The monastic caves were generally identical with the Ajanta type of monasteries, though there were varieties in some of the excavations. Cave II is interesting on account of its lateral galleries, divided into compartments, each with a figure of the Buddha, substituted for the monastic cells on either side. Cave V stands by itself, having no parallel in the vast range of cave shrines in India, because of the division of the hall into a nave and two aisles by two rows of pillars. Cave VIII is important as exhibiting a sanctuary standing free and with a passage around, as we find in some of the Aurangabad caves.

But by far the most important are the two-storeyed monasteries, Nos. XI and XII. No. XII, known as the Tin Thal is the more commodious with a rock-cut gateway leading to the open court in front of the facade. This facade rises in three storeys, each with a verandah supported by eight square pillars. In the interior, however, each storey is differently disposed. The ground floor is of the usual plan of a pillared hall with a sanctuary cella at the far end and small square cells on either side. The first floor has a gallery for images on either side, instead of the monastic apartments, forming a kind of iconostasis, as we have in Cave II. The hall in the topmost storey may be said to

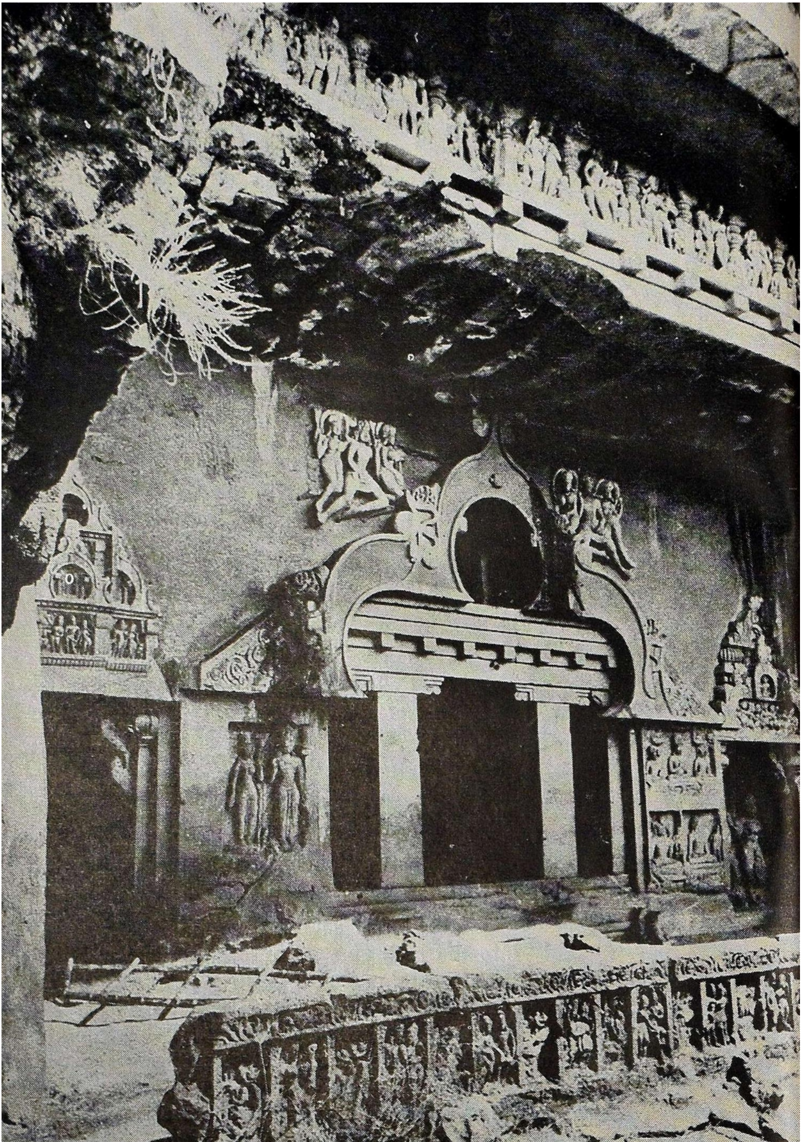
Mother and Child—
Cave XVII (Ajanta)



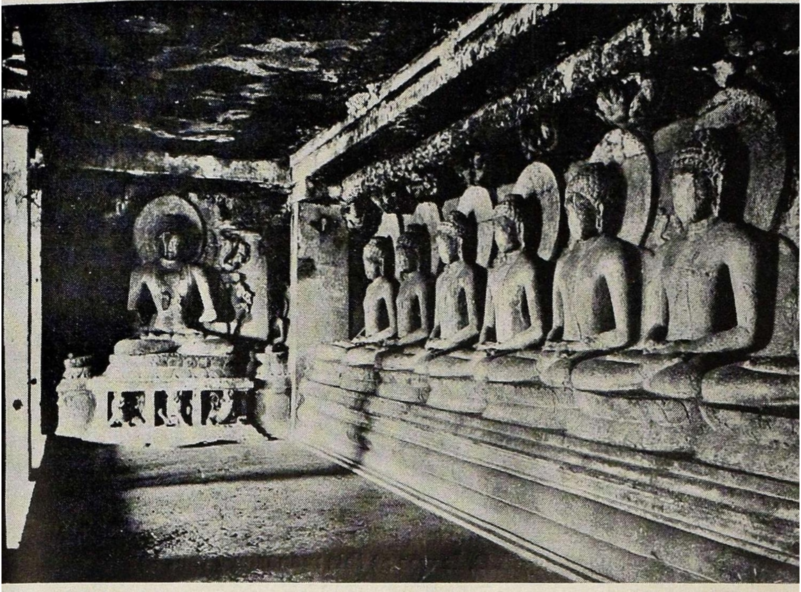
Inside the Chaitya Hall, Cave XXVI (Ajanta

have been planned in cruciform shape with a long nave driven axially into the rock and a transept on each side cutting it at right angles. The chapel is placed at the far end of the nave and the monastic cells along the sides of the cruciform structure. A preliminary attempt at this cruciform arrangement may be recognised in the transverse plan of Cave V.

The Tin Thal is one of the most interesting of its class in the whole of India. The imposing facade, rising to a



Facade of Visvakarma Cave (Ellora)



Images of Buddha in the Tin Thal Cave (Ellora)

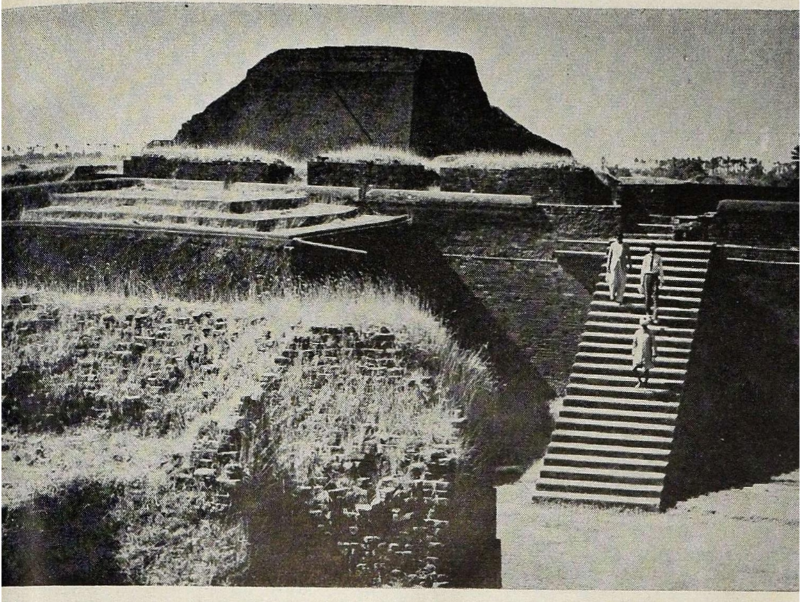
height of nearly 50 feet, though severely plain, lends a majesty to the exterior appearance of the cave. The sober treatment of the facade is counterbalanced by the rich profusion of sculptures in the interior arrangement of each storey which, though differently disposed, indicates a balance and consistency of design throughout. There is moreover, a grandeur and propriety in its conception which it would be difficult to surpass in cave architecture.

In contrast to the gorgeous paintings at Ajanta, sculptures, massive in size and superb in execution, form an important heritage of Ellora. As they portray chiefly the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and other divinities, they follow the accepted formulae of such representations, and the freedom and variety, recognised in the narrative scenes from the inexhaustible store of mythology, as we have in the Ajanta paintings, are lacking.

# NALANDA

The far-famed monastic establishments at Nalanda have a supreme importance in the history of latter-day Buddhism. According to tradition, the place was visited several times by the Buddha and the history of the monastic establishments can be traced back to the days of Asoka. But excavations have not yet revealed any proof of its being occupied prior to the time of the Guptas; and the series of evidence—inscriptions, seals and other remains, coupled with references in literature—give a glimpse of the flourishing state of this famous monastic site from the 5th down to the end of the 12th century A.D. It was at this monastery that the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang stayed for some time. He gives a detailed and graphic account of the different establishments with as many as 10,000 inmates, their rules and practices. He also mentions Harsha and several other earlier kings as beneficent patrons of this institution. I-tsing, another Chinese traveller, has also left us a picture of the life led by the Nalanda monks who were maintained by the 200 villages bestowed upon them by different kings. Nalanda was known throughout the Buddhist world of the time for its learned and versatile teachers, and the name of its *acharyas*—Silabhadra, Santarakshita and Atisa Dipankara—shining luminaries in a galaxy of many more—conjure up a vision of the supreme eminence of the Nalanda Mahavihara throughout its prosperous history.

The ruins of Nalanda extend over a large area. The structures exposed to view represent only part of the extensive establishment and consist of monastic, stupa and temple sites. Lengthwise they extend from south to north, the monasteries on the eastern flank and the stupas



The Great Stupa in the ruins of a monastery (Nalanda)

and the temples on the western. The monasteries were all built on more or less the same plan in each case, with rows of cells giving on to a corridor round a central courtyard and a shrine against the back wall, just opposite the entrance. Different strata, accumulated one above the other, are quite clear and indicate successive repairs and renovations. There is also evidence that these monasteries were storeyed structures. Even in their ruins, they convey the memory of their imposing and glorious past.

The stupa site No. 3 is a huge structure standing in the middle of a court in the south-western flank and surrounded by a number of votive stupas. The original stupa had been a small structure which was successively enlarged and built over, the present building now before us being the result of seven such accumulations. The successive enlargements

followed the square plan of the original stupa, and the fifth of these stupas, which is the best preserved, had four corner towers and was decorated with well-modelled stucco figures and with rings of votive stupas, occasionally with bricks inscribed with sacred Buddhist texts in the characters of about the 6th century A.D.

To the north of this stupa and in the same alignment, there have been exposed temple structures, each with a later temple erected directly over the remains of an earlier one. The later structure shows rectangular projections at the four corners of the square cells, no doubt intended for miniature shrines. In the surrounding court, there are traces of structures in the shape of miniature shrines, votive stupas, etc. Such remains extend on all sides and further explorations are necessary to expose the numerous buildings and establishments that arose at this famous place.

In the Museum nearby are deposited the numerous sculptures and other antiquities recovered during the excavations and these are sure to impress the visitor.

The wealth of epigraphic material is no less telling. It includes copperplate and stone inscriptions and inscriptions on bricks and terra-cotta seals. Among the latter, we have the official seal belonging to the community of venerable monks of the great monastery. The inscriptions on bricks record such sacred texts as *Nidanasutra* or *Pratityasamutpadasutra* detailing the Buddha's theory of the chain of causation, while the *dharani* of the same may be found in a number of oval terra-cotta seals. Nalanda is justly famous for the royal seals of the historic kings and emperors who patronised the establishment munificently. Such names as Narasimhagupta, Kumaragupta II, Vainyagupta and Vishnugupta of the imperial Gupta family, Sarvavarman and Avantivarman of the Maukhari dynasty, Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa, Harshavardhana of Kanauj and several other kings of unknown lineage show how this monastic establishment was able to inspire unstinted royal patronage from far and near, and in successive ages. To these a stone inscription adds the name of Yasovarman of Kanauj and copperplate inscriptions those of Dharmapala and Devapala, the most powerful of the Pala kings, including also a royal

Votive Stupas in the foreground
of the Great Stupa (Nalanda)

patron from outside India, king Balaputradeva of the Sailendra dynasty of Srivijaya (Java-Sumatra). Among the later Pala emperors, Mahipala I munificently helped towards the extensive repairs and renovations of this far-famed institution, while a monk, Vipulasrimitra, is known to have constructed a monastery there towards the closing days of its eventful history. There must have been other benefactors among private individuals, nobles and commoners alike.

The Buddhism that was practised at Nalanda and other contemporary institutions in Bengal and Bihar was no longer the simple Hinayana; nor was it the Mahayana of the earlier days. It was strongly imbued with ideas of Tantricism, not far removed from Tantric Brahmanism. The Muhammadan invasion dealt a death blow to these cloistered strongholds of the religion of Gautama Buddha, which had been so transformed as to become insensibly a part of modern Hinduism.

# CONCLUSION

Buddhism has been a great force in the history of Asia. Over great areas it still survives. The accumulation of ages has transformed the religion a good deal by shrouding the original teachings of Gautama Buddha. But one cannot forget that he made known to us the four noble truths and the eightfold path of righteousness. It was he who taught us the sanctity of life and to strive for Nirvana as the ultimate goal. Nirvana does not mean extinction but self-abnegation, the losing of self in something greater than self. There can be no social order, no security, no peace or happiness, no righteous leadership, until men lose themselves in something greater than themselves. India, where this great teacher of humanity was born, still bears witness to this holy life, and a visit to the Buddhist places of pilgrimage must uplift the mind and soul.

APPENDIX

# SITES OF ASOKA'S EDICTS

The greatest patron of Buddhism was Asoka who, true to the principles of the teaching of the Master, was intent on building up a *dharmarajya* based on universal well-being. The main sources of our knowledge about him and his activities fall into two categories—literature and archaeology. Of these, the latter, consisting of Asoka's own inscriptions, constitutes the direct source of his history. In his inscriptions, the king is styled as *Devanampiya Piyadasi laja* (*Devanam priya Priyadarsi raja*), i.e., "king Priyadarsi, beloved of the gods". The identity of this king with Asoka, suggested long ago, has been proved beyond doubt by the discovery of the Maski version of the minor Rock Edicts which substitutes the name of Asoka for Priyadarsi.

The inscriptions of Asoka have been found engraved on rocks, on separate stone blocks, on stone pillars and in caves. Except for the last, they have been designated as *dhammalipis* translated as "edicts of the law of piety (Morality)". In the following pages is given a table of the sites of Asoka's inscriptions.

## MAJOR ROCK EDICTS

| Sites | Location | Contents |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Dhauli | Near Bhubaneswar, Puri district, Orissa | Edicts I-X, XIV and two Kalinga Edicts |
| 2. Girnar | 1 mile east of Junagadh, Gujarat | Edicts I-XIV |
| 3. Jaugada | Ganjam district, Orissa | Edicts I-X, XIV and two Kalinga Edicts |
| 4. Kalsi | Dehra Dun district, U.P. | Edicts I-XIV |
| 5. Mansehra | Hazara district, West Pakistan | Edicts I-XIV |
| 6. Shahbazgarhi | 9 miles from Mardan, Peshawar district, West Pakistan | Edicts I-XIV |
| 7. Sopara | Thana district, Maharashtra | Edicts VIII-IX |
| 8. Yerragudi | 8 miles north-east of Gooty, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh | Edicts I-XIV, Minor Rock Edicts I-II |

## MINOR ROCK EDICTS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ahraura | Mirzapur district, U.P. | Edict I |
| 2. Amar Colony | Delhi | Edict I |
| 3. Bairat | Jaipur district, Rajasthan | Edict I |
| 4. Brahmagiri | Chitradurga district, Mysore | Edicts I-II |
| 5. Gavimath | Near Koppal, Raichur district, Mysore | Edict I |
| 6. Gujarra | Datia district, M.P. | Edict I |
| 7. Jatinga-Ramesvara | Chitradurga district, Mysore | Edicts I-II |
| 8. Maski | Raichur district, Mysore | Edict I |
| 9. Palkigundu | Near Gavimath in Raichur district, Mysore | Edict I |
| 10. Rajula Mandagiri | Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh | Edicts I-II |

| *Sites* | *Location* | *Contents* |
|---|---|---|
| 11. Rupnath | 14 miles west of Sleemanabad, Jabalpur, district, M.P. | Edict I |
| 12 Sahasram | Shahabad district, Bihar | Edict I |
| 13 Shar-i-kuna | Near Kandahar, Afghanistan | Edict IV |
| 14. Siddapura | Chitradurga district, Mysore | Edicts I-II |
| 15. Yerragudi | 8 miles north-east of Gooty, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh | Rock Edicts I-XIV, Minor Rock Edicts I-II |

## SEPARATE ROCK EDICT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Bairat (Calcutta-Bairat; Indian Museum, Calcutta) | Jaipur district, Rajasthan | Edict III enumerating sacred texts |

## MAJOR PILLAR EDICTS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Kausambi (Allahabad-Kosam: Removed to Allahabad fort by Akbar) | Kosam, a village in Allahabad district, U.P. | Edicts I-VI, Schism Edict |
| 2. Lauriya-Araraj (Radhia) | 20 miles north-west of Kesariya, Champaran district, Bihar | Edicts I-VI |
| 3. Lauriya-Nandangarh Mathia | 15 miles north-west of Bettiah, Champaran district, Bihar | Edicts I-VI |

| *Sites* | *Location* | *Contents* |
|---|---|---|
| 4. Mirath (Delhi-Meerut: Removed and re-erected on the Ridge, Delhi, by Firuz Ridge, Delhi, by Firuz | Village near Meerut, U.P. | Edicts I-VI |
| 5. Rampurva | 32½ miles north of Bettiah, Champaran district, Bihar | Edicts I-VI |
| 6. Topra (Delhi-Topra: Removed and re-erected at Kotla Firuz Shah, Delhi, by Firuz Shah Tughluq) | Village in Ambala district, Haryana | Edicts I-VII |

## MINOR PILLAR EDICTS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Kausambi (Allahabad-Kosam: Removed to Allahabad fort by Akbar) | Kosam, a village in Allahabad district, U.P. | Schism Edict |
| 2. Sanchi | South of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh (See under Sanchi) | Schism Edict |
| 3. Sarnath | West of the Main Shrine (See under Sarnath) | Schism Edict |
| 4. Kausambi (See above) | (See above) | Edict of the second queen, Karuvaki, mother of Tivara |

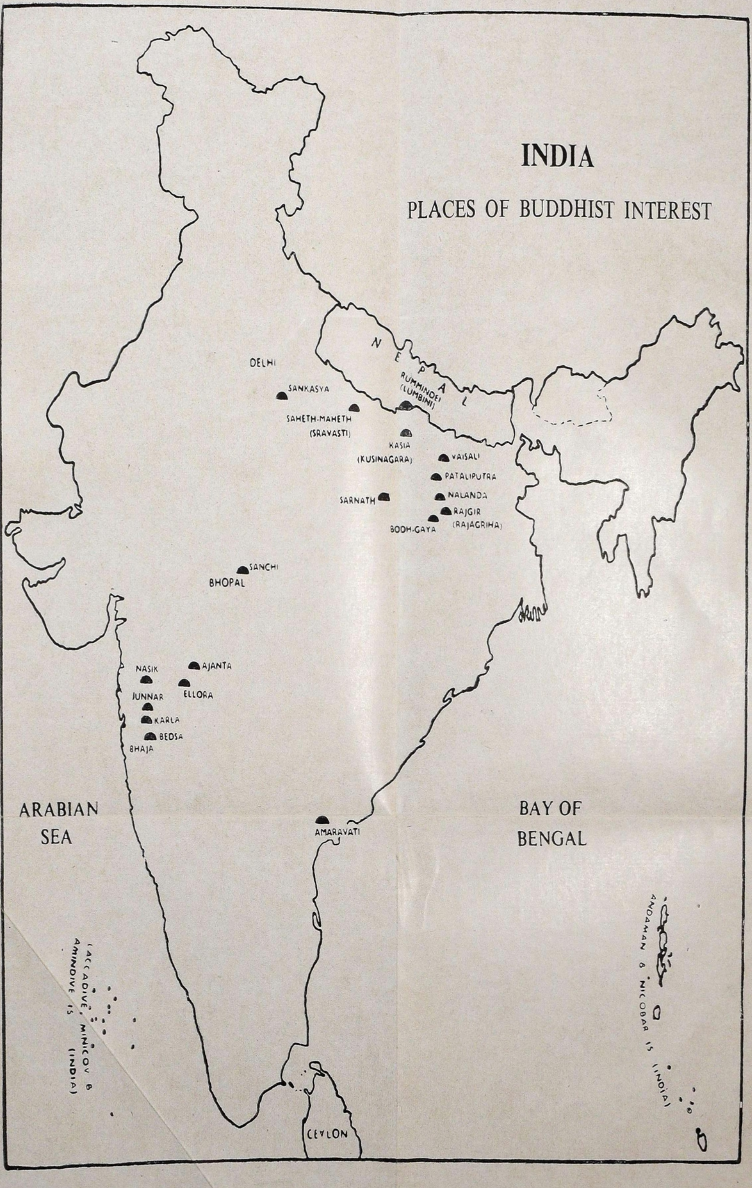
## COMMEMORATIVE INSCRIPTIONS

| *Sites* | *Location* | *Contents* |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Lumbini (Rummindei) | At Lumbini proper | Commemorating Asoka's visit to the birthplace of the Lord in the 20th year of his consecration |
| 2. Nigliva | 13 miles north-west of Rummindei | Commemorating Asoka's visit to the stupa of Konagamana which was enlarged by his orders |

## DONATIVE INSCRIPTIONS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Barabar | 15 miles from Gaya, Bihar | Records gift by Asoka of three caves to the Ajivikas, two in the 12th year and the third in the 21st year of his coronation. |

The above inscriptions are of outstanding interest for a study of Asoka as herein we can trace the successive stages in the development of the mind of Asoka, one of the greatest personalities in world history.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PLACES OF BUDDHIST INTEREST
NEPAL
DELHI
SANKASYA
RUMMINDEI (LUMBINI)
SAHETH-MAHETH (SRAVASTI)
KASIA (KUSINAGARA)
VAISALI
PATALIPUTRA
SARNATH
NALANDA
RAJGIR (RAJAGRIHA)
BODH-GAYA
SANCHI
BHOPAL
NASIK
AJANTA
ELLORA
JUNNAR
KARLA
BEDSA
BHAJA
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